Character-Forming Discipleship: An Analysis of the Discipleship Practices of Ministry Leaders

Across the United States

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Abstract

This presentation will describe the discipleship practices of 96 youth leaders from various

theological traditions, ethnic and racial groups, and sized churches. We will connect those

practices to character and virtue development and discuss implications for building character-

forming youth ministries. We will also highlight the unique strengths youth ministries have for

character formation, how youth leaders can build on those strengths, and how youth ministry

educators may prepare these leaders for such work.

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Introduction

The overarching goal of the Fuller Youth Institute's (FYI) Character and Virtue Development in Youth Ministry (CVDYM) Project[i] is to equip congregations with resources to better cultivate in adolescents key virtues and components of character. Though researchers from many disciplines have examined CVD and identified several fruitful interventions that may serve adolescents well, little research is easily available to or used by youth ministry leaders. Some traditions may focus on virtues and character to a degree, but the exceptional work of CVD scholars is typically underutilized in Christian congregations.

This underutilization of research is unfortunate because character and virtue development are important for the overall thriving of adolescents and are related to the hopes of Christian communities that their adolescents would grow in faith and in living out the virtues associated with the heart of Christian discipleship. Sadly, research trends reveal that current youth ministry practices do not seem to result in faith retention and longevity of church affiliation. A growing body of research suggests that almost half of formerly churched adolescents disengage from God and the church after high school. In response to this reality, the Fuller Youth Institute conducted the College Transition Project (which led to the *Sticky Faith* movement and resources)[ii] and developed subsequent resources that continue to provide tens of thousands of parents and youth workers with practical ideas to nurture long-term faith and religious community participation. Although these resources have proven to be helpful, most leaders agree that the faith attrition of young people isn't merely a youth ministry problem – it is a systemic church problem. Although senior pastors (many of whom are serving in aging congregations) express an almost universal

desire to engage young people, they often don't know where to start or how to change their church culture to make that possible.

In response to these challenges, FYI completed nearly four years of additional research (known as the Churches Engaging Young People, or CEYP, Project) and released the project's findings in the book *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church[iii]*. *Growing Young* highlights congregations that are bright spots, bucking the trend of aging and declining, and instead effectively engaging 15- to 29-year-olds. These congregations are taking the formation of young people seriously by prioritizing them across the intergenerational life of the congregation and creating warm, welcoming communities in which young people feel known and accepted.

However, we hear from many youth ministry leaders a desire for more grounded resources to help them shape the lives and practices of teenagers beyond what typical youth ministry resources offer. They need help guiding young people toward more integrated lives that practice biblically informed virtues in everyday contexts of school, sports, neighborhood, and family. The climate is ripe for CVD-based resources to undergird thoughtful youth ministry with research-based practices.

Though little research is being utilized by the typical Christian youth ministry, this is not due to a lack of interest. Indeed, one problem that has received an increasing amount of attention in recent years concerns a focus on "head" knowledge, rather than matters of the "heart." Several Christian scholars have argued that congregations have overemphasized the importance of upper-level beliefs (e.g., worldviews, reflective thought, reasoning) resulting in a heavy emphasis on certain religious practices (e.g., preaching, memorization of Scripture). This emphasis on upper-level beliefs has in some settings led to a neglect of habits and practices that shape lower-level,

intuitive thought—or as one scholar has described it, "what we love."[iv] These concerns have gained traction in Christian communities as these communities recognize that shaping the "heart" is essential for the biblical mandate to become disciples of Christ. As the writers of the Gospels and Epistles describe a disciple of Christ, they often focus on virtues (e.g., what it means to love, the fruit of the spirit) and not solely on proper belief. Hence, shifting to a "heart" focus can help congregations fulfill their call to become disciples of Christ. A "heart" focus also connects well with many aspects of three questions today's adolescents wrestle with: Who am I? (Identity), Where do I fit? (Belonging), and What difference can I make? (Purpose).[v]

Accordingly, FYI's CVDYM project addresses three problems simultaneously. First, Christian congregations underutilize the current scientific research in CVD and the resources it has produced. Second, youth ministry leaders name discipleship as an important goal but often struggle to clearly define and conceptualize discipleship[vi]. Though youth ministry leaders desire to see adolescents grow as disciples, they are less clear about what this means. Third, leaders (even those able to conceptualize discipleship well) often struggle to understand how such discipleship goals should be enacted, tending to inadvertently omit key components (often character and virtue) or failing to be comprehensive.[vii]

In response to these three problems, we investigated how church and parachurch communities today are forming the character and virtue—particularly virtues of compassion, faith, forgiveness, hope, humility, love, and perseverance—of adolescents (including in, but not limited to, discipleship programs) using semi-structured interviews. Anne Snyder, author of *The Fabric of Character*, argues that "the question of character in today's America [is] inextricably linked to the question of community."[viii]. She critiques the idea that character can be taught didactically like math or physics. Rather, her research has demonstrated that organizations

successfully engaged in CVD "may have other ends in view – health, economic empowerment, rehabilitation – but in so doing transform people's behavior and moral sense."[ix] In other words, some of the best CVD work does not aim for CVD directly, but is generated by a community with other ends in mind. According to a 2018 survey conducted by FYI, the so-called "other ends" for youth leaders are discipleship.[x] Our research and a 2019 gathering of Christian ministry leaders, psychologists, and practical theologians in turn revealed that discipleship could mean everything from encouraging relationships with God, to seeking justice, to developing a healthy self-concept, depending on the congregation. In order to successfully engage youth leaders in CVD, given this diversity of perspectives, we needed to better understand how church and parachurch communities from various denominational backgrounds and their existing discipleship programs are already forming adolescents and their character.

Method

Procedures

The present research investigated how church and parachurch communities today are forming the character and virtue of adolescents. Given the difficulty youth leaders experience pursuing these goals and the lack of clarity surrounding these concepts,[xi] this investigation enabled us to better determine *what* youth leaders want to see develop within their adolescents (including formational outcomes and how those are measured) and *how* they attempt to form adolescents.

Our goal was to build upon knowledge gained in earlier research to further investigate the formational practices used to shape faith and CVD, particularly compassion, faith, forgiveness, hope, humility, love, and perseverance. When leaders name "spiritual maturity" or "fruit of the Spirit" as qualities that are evidence of Christ's work, we further investigated what these

qualities looked like among the adolescents they serve, assessing the attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors that serve as evidence of this work and collecting specific stories and examples of this formation. When leaders named "discipleship" or "mentoring" as processes by which they and others nurture these qualities, we investigated what these processes entail, assessing the formal and informal goals and features of these processes.

We conducted ninety-six 60-90-minute phone interviews with youth ministry leaders from churches and parachurch organizations across the country.[xii] We utilized a stratified sample that reflected the broad diversity of Christian congregations in the United States, not only in denomination, tradition, ethnocultural background, and size, but also in the degree to which and means by which they prioritize the character and virtue formation of adolescents. Specifically, we prioritized the inclusion of churches with various (1) denominational or theological backgrounds, (2) ethnocultural backgrounds, and (3) sized congregations while remaining sensitive to other realities including socioeconomic status, geographic location, and gender of leader.

Interviews were semi-structured, enabling researchers to compare responses across interviews while also allowing interviewers to ask probing questions when further specificity is needed. Interview questions included questions addressing desired transformation among young people (e.g., "what are the most important qualities of being a disciple of Christ?"); several virtues (e.g., "If you were talking with young people how would you describe compassion?"); the process of transformation (e.g., "what formal or structured programs or practices are in place to foster discipleship?"); identity, belonging, and purpose (e.g., "Do you have specific goals associated with changes in their sense of identity or how they answer the question, 'Who am

I?'"); and other topics. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed by a team of researchers.[xiii]

Participants

Further details concerning the participant sample are included in the tables below. The sample size of some groups is small and we cannot generalize across any ethnocultural or socioeconomic group due to the diverse representation within each.

Denomination/Tradition	
Adventist (SDA)	8.33%
Baptist (SBC, ABC, NBC)	11.46%
Nondenominational	21.88%
Reformed (RCA, PCA, PCUSA)	10.42%
Methodist/Holiness (AME, UMC, Nazarene)	8.33%
Pentecostal (AOG, COGIC)	16.67%
Lutheran/Anglican (Episcopoal, ELCA, LCMA)	5.21%
Restorationist (COC, DOC)	2.08%
Roman Catholic	9.38%
Orthodox Church	6.25%

Ethnocultural Background	
Asian/Asian American	18.75%
Black/African American	18.75%
Hispanic/Latina/o American	27.08%
White	21.88%
Other/Multiracial	13.54%

Results

The following section summarizes our major findings.[xiv] The first section below highlights the practices we observed in churches and parachurch ministries that seem to develop character and virtue. The second section highlights activities and beliefs related to seven specific virtues.

Character-Forming Practices

The Formation of Relationships

Relationships are the primary way in which ministries form character and virtue in young people. The majority of people interviewed in this project cited relationships as critical in both the discipleship and character formation of young people. While some ministries rely on programs to foster relationships, others attempt to develop them more organically. Relationships with parents, leaders, and peers allow young people to feel safe, known, cared for, and seen. Being seen makes it possible for young people to know who they are in Christ. In many ministries, relationships are central to most everything that occurs, often becoming even more important than faith formation programs in the development of character and virtues.

While two types of relationships emerged as particularly important – relationships between young people and parents as well as relationships between young people and other adult leaders – in some instances, relationships between peers were also named as an important driver of discipleship. In some settings, one-on-one relationships seem to be valued more than relationships between multiple youth and one adult (like those you might find in a small group).

Relationships between Young People and their Parents. Many youth workers acknowledge that parents are the primary disciplers of young people. For this reason, ministries often felt a high degree of responsibility in guiding and teaching parents so that they, in turn, can guide and teach their children. In some contexts, character and virtue development are actually seen as a family affair. However, even youth workers who long to include parents in their work with young people seldom have a strategy for truly partnering with them in character and virtue development. Those who do differ widely in how they partner with parents. Some youth leaders see partnership as sending weekly e-mails about what young people are currently learning in order to ask parents to intentionally reinforce it at home.

Partnering with parents is an area in which several key ethnocultural differences emerged. For example, in some immigrant churches, parents often worshiped separately from young people, with parents worshiping in their native language while young people worship in English. Some Asian American or Asian Pacific Islander leaders saw conflict emerge between parents and young people regarding the prioritization of church or academics, with some parents prioritizing academics over youth group attendance. Youth workers in these contexts sometimes stacked youth events on Sundays because young people are so busy throughout the rest of the week.

Relationships between Young People and Adult Leaders. Ministries saw relationships between young people and adult leaders as key to both discipleship and the formation of character and virtue. In some ministries, adult leaders were encouraged to form deep and lasting relationships with young people. Leaders were instructed to "walk alongside" young people, "engage them", and love them. As leaders walked alongside young people, they modeled virtues, called out the virtues they see in them, and helped them process everyday experiences and hardships in life. When leaders listened to teenagers share their experiences, they were better able to encourage them to grow in their relationships with God as well as their character.

In some contexts, youth workers actively and intentionally took steps to cultivate relationships between youth and various adult leaders as well as youth and their peers. These relationships can form a web that acts as support and scaffolding in the character and virtue development of young people. Since walking alongside young people takes time, some youth workers particularly valued adult leaders who are willing to serve long-term.

While many ministries cultivated a leadership core of adults within their specific ministries, it is also important to note that relationships between young people and adult leaders

were not necessarily limited to the confines of youth ministry. Instead, these relationships sometimes formed organically as young people served and interacted with adults, either within a church community or outside of it. Because relationships between young people and adult leaders were considered important, some youth leaders spent time training other leaders in this area.

Modeling and Mentoring

While modeling and mentoring take on different forms in different contexts, they were important ways churches and parachurch ministries instilled character and virtues in young people. Youth workers sensed their example is key to helping young people develop their character. Modeling gave young people human visuals that allowed them to see what character and virtues looked like in real, everyday life. In order to show young people how to live out character and virtues in their own lives, youth workers commonly shared examples from their own lives that brought the theoretical and practical together. In some settings, mentoring was formalized in a programmatic way. In others, it was more organic, focused on a ministry of accompaniment and of doing life together.

Discipling Young People

In many instances, discipleship or spiritual growth tended to be a ministry's primary goal, rather than character and virtue formation. Given the idea from Anne Snyder that character is never aimed at directly, but always achieved by something aimed at other ends, this may not be surprising. Even so, there was no clear consensus regarding what discipleship is, what it looks like, or what it actually involves. Despite this ambiguity, when people talked about discipleship, they assumed that others knew (and agreed with) what they were referring to. Based on these interviews, discipleship might best be defined as "developing relationships with young people for

the purpose of _____" with youth leaders free to fill in the blank with whatever the purpose of their ministry is.

In some ministries, discipleship was a matter of doing life together. For other youth workers, discipleship involved helping young people grow in their faith, often through Bible study. In some contexts, youth workers believed it's particularly important in discipleship to invite adult speakers with similar backgrounds to talk about God's role in their lives with young people. Still other ministries defined discipleship as the process of a young person taking ownership of their faith. Other youth workers saw discipleship as leadership formation, in particular, as young people taking initiative to serve or lead various youth group activities. A few ministries viewed discipleship as a checklist.

Some low-income congregations also included various life skills classes and extracurricular activities like tutoring and sports among their discipleship efforts. In some lower-income contexts, discipleship efforts also include things such as providing food for young people in order to meet their physical needs. In other lower-income contexts, discipleship also included helping young people become "change agents" in their communities so they could become part of the solution to the problems and suffering they see and experience in their neighborhoods.

Some youth workers also believed that immersive experiences such as camps, retreats, and mission trips were key to discipleship. Experiences such as camp also exposed students from some communities to a world outside of their own and God in a different light.

Youth workers also used a variety of resources for discipling young people, including but not limited to Pathfinders, spiritual gifts assessments, and even the Myers-Briggs and DISC-profiles.

Teaching

Ministries used various teaching methods to form character and virtue in young people. In some contexts, youth workers specifically taught about virtues. In other contexts, small groups tended to be the primary place where character and virtue was formed, largely through conversations. Small groups were particularly important when they gave young people space to question and doubt. In many contexts, small groups were places where young people could "talk about" a variety of circumstances and events happening in their lives. Another important aspect of teaching - particularly in ministries with congregants who were people of color - is the development of critical thought.

It was important to note that many youth workers were not formally teaching Christian virtues at their regular faith formation programs. Instead, they were creating an awareness for what Christian character looked like through all they do, including modeling and teaching. To put it another way, most leaders built an awareness of virtues in their young people as opposed to equipping them with the skills that actually transform their behavior and contribute to their character development.

The Creation of Safe Spaces

The importance of creating safe space cannot be overlooked in the development of character and virtues in young people. Feeling comfortable and physically safe helped young people belong by enabling them to feel comfortable sharing their struggles with others (either adults or their peers). As young people shared, their character is formed as they process their stories and in particular, their struggles. When students felt safe enough to let their guard down, they allowed themselves to be discipled and their character to be developed.

Spaces that are physically safe are welcoming and comfortable. Often, youth had a sense of ownership over these spaces. Some, but not all, ministries found a dedicated youth space valuable in discipling young people. Spaces that were emotionally safe allowed young people to ask hard questions and express doubts, two practices that appear to be foundational in the formation of character and virtues. As young people felt comfortable thinking critically and expressing doubt, they learn about everything, including character. Not all youth workers felt constrained to forming these kinds of safe spaces in the church itself.

Insights Concerning Specific Virtues

Love was Central to Many Ministries

Many ministries identified love as core, central, or very important to their work. Other ministries used love as something of a catch phrase with their teens. Not surprisingly, relationships played an important part in developing love in young people. In particular, youth workers developed love in young people by modeling it. Leaders also modeled love to young people by being present in their lives outside of church, being consistent and available, and providing for their physical needs. Ministries also intentionally formed love in young people by serving others. In addition to the ways in which language impacted young people's understanding of love, ethnocultural identity also impacted how young people understood or received love.

Compassion was Often Developed by Serving Others

Many ministries developed young people's compassion by giving them opportunities to serve others, either to external communities or by serving within their churches. While many virtues are about intake (for example, through learning through teaching, discussions, etc.), compassion was more outward-focused. It was often about students decentering themselves

through tangible action. Compassion was also regularly developed through conversations – both those used to process service projects and mission trips as well as those regarding difficult topics. Youth workers also formed compassion in young people through modeling. Within Latina/o congregations, testimony may be another particularly important tool in forming compassion.

While many ministries tended to focus their efforts to form compassion outward, it appears that in certain communities there is a tendency to see and serve people's needs within the congregation first. In this model, the intergenerational relationships, testimonios, and caring for the families' needs within the congregation provide space for youth to be involved in the learning, change, and growth of their character development. These communities seemed to exemplify what it means to "suffer with" others. As the community came alongside people that are going through something, they "suffer with" them and also bear witness to answered prayers, perseverance, and victory.

Leaders Instilled Hope in Young People through Service Projects, the Liturgical Calendar, Devotionals, Testimonials, and Other Practices

Youth workers commonly utilized service projects and mission trips to form hope in young people. Some churches also leaned on the liturgical calendar to give them a framework for forming hope in young people, intentionally addressing hope during seasons that lend themselves to it, noticeably advent. Leaders also commonly used devotionals as well as testimonies to form hope in young people. A handful of communities also stressed the importance of relics in the formation of hope.

Other practices used to form hope are as varied as handing out donuts in schools in order to connect kids with the hope of Jesus to engaging in reconciliation efforts. As with so many of the virtues, relationships were a critical means of instilling hope in young people, largely

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conversationally. Analyses also showed clear examples of how ethnicity impacted hope, a virtue that may be particularly important and life-giving to communities that have historically been oppressed.

Leaders Used a Variety of Means to Develop Faith in Young People

Faith was the one virtue that some leaders thought was a "given" in their ministry to young people. Leaders who were more proactive about intentionally forming faith in young people often did so in a variety of ways, including through teaching and leading Bible studies. Additionally, leaders commonly used spiritual practices, prayer, mission trips, and sharing testimonies to form faith. Some youth workers viewed giving students the chance to step out of their comfort zones, perhaps by becoming student leaders, as an exercise in forming faith while others named liturgy as important in forming faith.

Communities of Color Experience a Different Lived Reality of Perseverance than White Communities

Perseverance tended to be built through steady suffering in a young person's life and a youth worker's ability to speak into and even reframe that suffering. Perseverance was not necessarily consciously developed in communities of color as much as it is inhabited by them. Some youth from communities of color came from contexts in which people's lives were greatly influenced by struggle, hard work, and overcoming. They had seen people modeling what it means to persevere through hardship and suffering every day of their lives. As a result, perseverance was not something that needed to be developed in the same way it needed to be instilled in some affluent White communities. In communities of color, youth workers did sometimes find it necessary to call out how young people had already persevered through their own trauma. Often, because of the lived reality of perseverance among minorities, this virtue was

also linked to others, like remaining steadfast in one's faith. Of note, leaders who had a working theology of suffering seem most equipped to help shape the character of young people who were experiencing suffering.

The Lived Experiences of Immigrant Communities and Communities of Color Complicated a Focus on Humility

Ministries used both teaching and modeling to form humility in young people. For the most part, however, humility appeared to be a difficult virtue to develop in young people. The difficultly these youth leaders experienced echoes some difficulties experienced by social scientists as they studied humility and developed interventions for it.[xv] The lived experiences of immigrant communities and communities of color also made it especially difficult for their leaders to focus on this virtue. As noted in an earlier paper, "at times humility may be construed or misused as a form of self-deprecation or humiliation."[xvi]

Forgiveness was Often Developed Conversationally

Since young people dealt with much relational conflict, opportunities for forgiveness abound and were often emphasized, although many of those interviewed did not name it as a strength of their ministry. Others saw forgiveness as a lifestyle.

Forgiveness was often taught reactively rather than proactively and enacted in both individual and group conversations. Some ministries even hosted experiences like "Forgiveness Sunday," where students were invited to intentionally confess and forgive one another as a community. Some ministries used camp or mission trips as opportunities to ask young people to forgive those who have hurt them. Others encouraged young people to practice forgiveness by correcting those aspects of culture they feel are not Christian.

Other ministries tried to model forgiveness to young people. Related to modeling, some findings suggested that leaders who had practiced forgiveness in their own lives may be better equipped at instilling this virtue in the lives of young people.

Discussion

These findings bear important implications for integrating character and virtue development research into youth ministry practice. The following section highlights the unique strengths and opportunities youth ministries have for character formation and considers how youth ministry leaders can build on those strengths for character growth and how youth ministry educators may prepare these leaders for such work.

Relationships are a Strength of Youth Ministry and an Opportunity for Character Development

One of the strongest findings identified during this research was the importance of forming relationships within youth ministries. The means by which these relationships were formed varied widely across ministries – some formed relationships in a formal or structured way, while others formed relationships organically; some focused on relationships with adult volunteers within the youth ministry, while others included adults from across the congregation – but the focus on these relationships was consistent.

We believe these relationships are a strength of youth ministry. While CVD in educational contexts may have the advantage of more regular and extended time periods (i.e., most US adolescents are in school for much of the day, whereas youth ministry leaders may see their young people for one hour each week), CVD in ministry contexts can build on the strong and varied (i.e., peer to peer, young person and adult) relationships that exist in these ministries.

These relationships also provide an avenue by which modeling and mentoring may reliably take place. Indeed, relationships and modeling are often so intertwined in some ministries that the concepts are conflated.

Research on character development also provides good reason to consider these relationships and the modeling they enable as strengths.[xvii] However, several important questions remain for youth ministry leaders hoping to build on these relationships to develop character and virtue in young people:

- If relationships are core, central, or the starting point for many ministries, what else must occur or what practices should follow?

- How can adults and peers best model character and virtue?

- How should leaders address the moral failures of leaders who were considered exemplars or models of character?

Character and Virtue Development Language Varies

One of the challenges that remains following this investigation is considering the language youth ministry leaders and youth ministry educators should use to describe character and virtue. Within an earlier research project surveying youth leaders from across the US,[xviii] the present research, and several meetings with youth leaders, denominational leaders, and character scientists, we continue to encounter diverse preferences for language to describe character and virtue development. Some leaders find the terms "character" and "virtue" problematic, while others prefer them. Some leaders prefer specific language and framing around terms such as "integrity," while others prefer to refer to character and virtue more generally using terms such as "qualities." Accordingly, we wonder:

- Can one term or phrase be used across traditions and groups to describe character and virtue?

- If not, how can we best describe character and virtue in subsequent resourcing?

Character-Forming Discipleship Practices

Earlier research[xix] helped FYI identify discipleship as one avenue by which character and virtue development may be integrated well into youth ministry. The present research confirmed that current conceptions of discipleship (though diffuse) will provide a helpful for avenue by which youth ministry leaders may integrate such formation. An additional challenge remains concerning the integration of character-forming discipleship practices (or "interventions," as they're often described in research on character formation). For instance, Dr. Everett Worthington provides invaluable research on how to build forgiveness and lays out several steps toward forgiving others.[xx] Though the topic of forgiveness may be readily integrated into youth ministry teachings and youth leaders may model forgiveness well, we wonder how to integrate these practices into youth ministry. More specifically, we wonder:

- During which ministry activities might youth leaders best teach these practices (e.g., small groups, retreats)?

- What resources will best serve youth leaders as they train youth leaders (e.g., curriculum, online training)?

We are encouraged by the findings of the present research and energized by the ministry efforts observed during this investigation. Subsequent research includes illustrative case studies that will provide further details concerning select ministries through document review, interviews, focus groups, and direct observation of ministry practice while onsite. Following these case studies, we will generate resources alongside other youth serving ministries.

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i This project and presentation was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this presentation are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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