

# **Youth Development Consultant End Report**

## **December 2017 Council Report from Sarah Neher**

### **Introduction**

In September of 2017, the Peace United Church of Christ church council asked me to lead the congregation in what it would look like if youth engagement were to be reimagined in the church. I primarily worked with Pastor Beth to create times to observe and talk with key stakeholders in the congregations regarding the youth. We met weekly to discuss plans and youth work theory. There was a meeting with parents to discuss where the youth group had been and where they would like to see it go. Likewise, I met with the youth to talk about how they would like to shape the youth program. As a result, Beth reinstated the youth leadership board. Lastly, I offered a workshop on youth theory. From each of these meetings I have hope for the future of the youth program at Peace UCC, however, I do see some areas where the congregation needs to shift their culture and attitude about youth work in the church.

### **Parent Meeting**

On October 8th parents were invited to join for a discussion about the state of the youth program at Peace UCC. From this meeting, I took away that the parents feel the youth program is starting a new. In the past, the youth program had dissolved, and in a sense, the program is starting from scratch. They have seen a shift since pastor Beth has arrived, the teens want to be together and have seemed to bond. The group supports each other inside the church and outside church activities. The parents also identified that the teens are deep and are capable of theological reflection. These are all things that parents pointed to as positive aspects of the youth program.

There were some concerns or areas of growth that the parents addressed. First, they wonder if there were ways to make activities more meaningful, specifically Sunday school, there were concerns that it was too much like school. Parents wondered if there were ways to integrate younger children more before they were in junior high, so they wanted to continue to come. They wondered if integrating children and youth more into the congregation from childhood if there would be more likely to be involved as a youth. Second, the parents wondered if there were ways to incorporate faith and the Bible in fresh and new ways into all activities they do. Lastly, parents pondered if there were ways to integrate youth after they graduate, so they stayed connected with the church.

Parents offered some suggestions for youth involvement. They thought it would be helpful for them to visit and learn about different denominations. They suggested having an after-school tutoring program where children and youth could come and work on homework after school and offer dinner to those in need. Integrating them into the music program was a way to bridge the generational gap between youth and the congregation. Last, parents suggested the youth went off-site to engage with the community. The take away from this meeting was that parents are hopeful for the future of the youth program and are invested in its success. Although they had some concerns the promise of what could be was the overall atmosphere.

## **Youth Meetings**

There were two times that we specifically engaged the youth in brainstorming how they wanted to form the youth program. During each of these meetings, we offered four questions for reflection: ‘What do you like about Peace UCC?’; ‘What would you like to see more of in youth group?’; ‘What does having a mature faith mean to you?’; ‘What adults and youth do you see as leaders in the youth program?’. There were a variety of answers. However, there were some common threads through the answers.

### *What do you like about Peace UCC?*

There were four prevailing trends in the answers to this question. First, some youth have been going to this church their whole life; this signals that they felt comfortable in the church but also demonstrates how some youth have not had exposure to other beliefs. Second, to the youth, the church feels like a welcoming community where people can discover their faith. One youth stated, “It’s a supportive place that teaches people about God, no matter who they are.” This answer demonstrates how they value to the community of the church and it feels like a safe place to discover their faith. Third, the youth liked that it was an inclusive place and that everyone is welcome no matter whom they are. Last, they liked the church because of the people, and it was a place where their friends were.

### *What would you like to see more of in youth group?*

What the youth wanted more of in youth group was: Going into the community to volunteering and getting out of the confines of the church to bring their faith into the world. In the words of one youth, “Service work and getting deeper into relating the Bible to life.” Other youth wanted more fun activities, a movie night, physical activities, and traveling. These responses reflected those of the parents that it is necessary to root the activities of the group in their faith.

### *What does having a mature faith mean to you?*

The point of a youth group should be to guide young people as they develop a mature faith. So we wanted to hear what a mature faith looked like from the perspective of the youth. Two threads emerged. First, was being able to articulate what one believes. Second, was being able to discuss their beliefs with others, including valuing diverse faiths. Two quotes captured this well: “Being able to discuss complex morals while keeping an open mind” and “Knowing your personal beliefs, and having a relationship with God that you value above all else.” These answers show the importance of developing their personal beliefs and faith while at the same time exploring how it interacts with the rest of the world.

### *What adults and youth do you see as leaders in the youth program?*

From the list of youth identified as leaders in the group and through conversations with Beth, four youth were invited to be on the Youth Leadership Board. The purpose of this board is to lead the youth program. Beth and I have a vision of the board helping to plan and execute a

social activity once a month. Beth will work to design more faith-based activities. The youth Leadership Board will also form the future and vision for the youth program.

### **Theory: The Isolation of Youth in American Society and Churches**

Over the last one hundred years, the construct of adolescence has emerged and is ever expanding, defined as the development stage between being a child and becoming an adult. Although there has been a period of adolescence for centuries, what it looks like and the length continues to evolve. Erik Erickson, a psychologist during the 1950's, saw this time as a moratorium from adult responsibilities and a time for youth to discover themselves. After World War II, to create a stable environment for youth to recover and grow from the horrific experiences they had endured during the war, there was an increased interest from adults to create space for young people to have a moratorium. This space from adulthood included the expansion of public education for young people accompanied by the rise in the high school graduation rates and an increase in college attendance. Along with the extension and systematizing of a moratorium, came the explosion of youth culture with its own music, clothing, and set of norms. With the rise of youth culture following World War II, came a separation of youth from their parent's. In recent decades there has been the addition of another stage of development, emerging adult, describing the period between adolescences and adulthood. This expansion of time dedicated to "self-discovery" is not surprising because youth lack the adult influence that demonstrates how to successfully navigate the adult world because of the continued isolation of youth from adults.

#### *The Historical Transition to Adulthood*

There are many stories in the Bible of the transition of children into adulthood. The transition was much shorter than that of young people today. It was usually spurred by an isolated event followed by a short period before being married and starting a household of their own. The event marking adulthood for boys was usually blessing and girls it was marked by ministration, which signaled the availability for marriage. Although these were very specific events marking the short transition to adulthood, children had been prepared for the tradition for years as they were integrated in to the fabric of society learning what it means to be an adult from an early age.

In O'Keefe's article *Growing Up Along: The New Normal Of Isolation In Adolescence* she examines the road to adulthood in medieval England. One of the greatest differences between medieval England and modern day America is the geographic and social stability of society. Most people in that era would live, work, and die in there home town. Throughout their lifetime people would only travel small distances from their villages.<sup>1</sup> This stability created a culture where people would truly know their neighbors and build communities where youth were known and would be influenced by those around them. The separation between family life and work that present day society faces was not a struggle that medieval England faced. Workshops and farms were usually connected to living areas creating an overlap of work and private life.<sup>2</sup>

Most parishioners were baptized, married, and buried though the same church and community. In medieval England there were no children programs at churches, children and

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa O'Keefe, "Growing Up Along: The New Normal Of Isolation In Adolescence," *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 13, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 69.

<sup>2</sup> O'Keefe, p. 69

youth were part of the wider congregation, participating among the adults. Religious instruction for children was the responsibility of the whole congregation especially that of parents and godparents.<sup>3</sup> This meant that from the beginning of a child's faith journey there were four adults invested in the religious growth of a child. Along with the support of adults, a child lived in a society with an awareness and acknowledgment of the spiritual.<sup>4</sup> This is unlike our American society that strives to have separation of church and state not only in government but also in educational institutions, leaving the spiritual for places of worship and in the home. This causes a compartmentalization of the different aspects that make-up the beliefs of youth.

Similar to the religious life of midlevel youth, the educational and professional life was infused with adult connection. Many children and youth grew up on farms where their parents, immediate, and extended families lived and worked. This is the setting where they received their basic education. Formal schooling was not widespread at this time. For those who lived in a town they moved into apprenticeships. In these positions youth would move and become apart of their masters households. The youth would stay with the master for seven to ten years before coming masters themselves, in return taking on apprentices. What this contract between masters and apprentices meant for young people was there was an adult who gave them intimate, passionate, and committed one on one attention to their education and formation.

Youth in today's society live in very different societies compared to the youth of medieval England. The most drastic changes to society have come during the last century. The first half of the 20th century was plagued by war, poverty, and death. In an effort to protect Christian and American development many new youth organizations sprung up to help youth make a difference in the hurt world.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1940s and 1950s the idea of the "teenager" was born. Different than youth preceding them, teenagers of the 1950's attended high school and participated in a new culture that was owned by the youth.<sup>6</sup> That enjoyed the same music, TV shows, movies, products and cultural beliefs. During this time Erik Erikson defined "identity" as the goal for adolescent to attain during this stage of development. Erikson called for moratorium or a "time-out" from the responsibilities that adults face.<sup>7</sup> This idea of a break for adult responsibilities is of stark contrast from children and youth in the Bible and during medieval times who were integrated into adulthood from a young age.

Erikson believed for youth to find their identity they needed to rely on institutions and significant adults to establish their selfhood. However shortly after this proposal of moratorium, the 1960's brought a rebellion from and the mistrust of institutions. As youth rebelled from institutions this also meant that they were rebelling from their parents and their culture completely taking away the institutions and significant adult interactions necessary for a successful moratorium. With this mistrust of institutions there was nothing for youth to put their identity in except the ideology of youth culture. Pair this rebellion with the increase of not only fathers working outside the home but the increase of women working outside the home in the 1950s youth had less adult interaction to begin with.

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<sup>3</sup> O'Keefe, p. 72

<sup>4</sup> O'Keefe, p. 73

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012) 5.

<sup>6</sup> Bergler, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing passion: Youth and the quest for a passionate church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) 12.

Consequently this lead to a new question defining the youth of the next generation, Generation X, will you be there for me?<sup>8</sup> For those in the Generation X who had parents that were Baby Boomers they felt abandoned by their parent's generation. The Baby Boomers had turned inward wanting to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, rejecting their relationship with their parents and the need for institutions. Thus leaving the Generation X with no adults in their life or institutions such as the church to lean on.

### *The Manifestation of Isolation in Youth Today*

With the explosion of technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century society has become increasingly transient, independent, and isolated. It is no longer assumed that you will be born, marry, and die in the same community. This shift to a transient society makes it impossible for young people to grow deep roots. It is also more likely that youth's families are not living within close proximity to extended family. This reduces the intimate adult interaction that a youth receives. In Dean's book *Practicing Passion* she describes what happened when a herd of youth male elephants don't have examples of elder bulls.<sup>9</sup> The unattended young male elephants misdirected their passion during musth and started to kill rhinos in the park. They young elephants were stripped of the role models of what was acceptable do with this extra energy, much like youth of today's society. They don't have the role models showing them how to navigate the ever-growing pressures of adulthood.

The change in working environments from parents has also changed. Rather than parents working in or close to home, commutes have been added and in most households both parents are working greatly diminishing if not eliminating the family time in households. How this isolation in families manifests itself different according to economic lines. In poorer household parents work multiple jobs, which often leaves youth to defend for themselves. For richer youth in order to upkeep the economic status of the family youth attend multiple lessons, tutoring, and sports activities, leaving little or no time for parent interaction.<sup>10</sup> In a lot of ways, out of necessity, youth have to act like adults when they haven't had anyone model what it looks like to be an adult. This results in misguided behavior that doesn't resemble a mature adult.

This lack of intimate involvement of parents in the lives of youth has led to helicopter parents, who seem to control every aspect of a youth's life. I believe that the helicopter parents use pieces of "data" they can collect about a youth's life, such as grades online or playing time in sports, to seem as if they are involved in their children's lives. Parents don't have time to sit down with youth to truly listen what is going on in their children's lives, let alone teach them how to navigate the world. For instance if a helicopter parent sees that their child is upset about not getting the playing time for a sports team they will contact the coach rather than taking the time to teach youth how to have difficult conversations with the coach themselves. This lack of intimate involvement in youth's lives perpetuates that cycle of isolation of youth in the social systems in which they are placed.

This reality of both parents working outside the home, means that children are no longer educated in home by family members. They are put in classrooms, which have twenty to thirty children to one adult, often relying on learning from other children rather than one on one

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<sup>8</sup> Dean, *Practicing passion: Youth and the quest for a passionate church*, p.75.

<sup>9</sup> Dean, *Practicing passion: Youth and the quest for a passionate church*, p.80.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Langford, "Troubled Complexion: Adolescent Abandonment as Spiritual Facelessness in the thought of James", *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 13, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 89.

instruction from adults. This extends further in middle and high school as they switch classrooms each period entering a new academic community with different students and educated by a new adult. Youth no longer get the individual attention that the master to apprentice relationships once gave. To further the isolation of youth the technology boom has meant that youth no longer seek intimate relationship with other youth. They have superficial lives through social media, more concerned about how many likes they get for a picture rather than deeply caring for someone. Just showing as youth become more isolated they become more self-centered caring for themselves because they don't feel deeply cared for by others.

This self-centeredness is also seen in the faith that many youth express. With the rise of youth programming in the 1950's church, along with it came the increased isolation of youth. Many youth ministry models were that of a one-eared Mickey Mouse, the youth programming being an isolated group branching off of the main church. This isolation from the larger congregation has resulted in a juvenilization of American Christianity. Juvenilization according to Bergler is "the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages."<sup>11</sup> As a result Christians have become more suspicious of figures of authority and traditions, which isolate adolescents in churches even further from the mature adults. Radiating from the Baby Boomer generation Bergler argues that adolescent Christians are preoccupied with themselves, finding who they are, and personal transformation.<sup>12</sup> I don't think personal exploration is a bad thing however when it starts to manipulate youth's faith to fit in the reality of the youth rather than the truth of the holy a disturbing problem arises. Adolescents who express a juvenile faith often seek relationship that will reinforce their faith and look for comfortable relationships rather than relationships that help them to seek truth.<sup>13</sup>

Bergler's solution to the juvenilization of American Christianity is to look to the bible for what mature Christianity should look like. This includes a faith that expect emotional comfort as well as suffering as part of a normal Christian life.<sup>14</sup> All too often youth are looking for a faith that makes them feel good but dismiss any notion that an authentic Christian life includes suffering, just as Jesus suffered. This idea of youth wanting a feel good faith is described further as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in Kenda Dean's book *Almost Christian*.<sup>15</sup> I agree with Bergler that we need to look toward the Bible for examples of mature expression of spirituality. However this isn't enough we need to demonstrate and help youth discover the passion of God's love that gathers in even the most isolated youth.

### *What Youth Are Desiring*

Youth are hungry; they are aching for something to be passionate for. With the juvenilization of Christianity the risk that comes from following in the steps of Jesus as gone away. Dean questions that since there is nothing left "to die for" in Christianity is there anything worth living for?<sup>16</sup> It is unmistakable that adolescents are passionate; it usually manifests itself in romantic relationships, where youth losing themselves in others. They are relationships filled with passion

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<sup>11</sup> Bergler, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Bergler, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Bergler, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Bergler, p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Dean, *Practicing passion: Youth and the quest for a passionate church*, p.9.

and commitment but not intimacy. Psychologist Robert Sternburg argues that we need all three components (commitment, passion, and intimacy) in his “Triangle Theory of Love”, to have a wholesome love.<sup>17</sup> We learn intimacy ultimately from the love of God. However this intimacy is first shown from the adults in our life.

The rise of youth programs harnessed this passion youth feel paired with commitment but it misses the intimacy that is expressed in the passion of Christ. For youth to truly find authentic passion they need to be transformed and rooted in the sacrificial love of Jesus, truly experiencing the intimacy of God. Dean describes, “Christ’s Passion transforms adolescent desire into sacrificial love that finds expression in the witness of the church and is made visible in the practices of Christian community that shape human relationship according to a “cruciform pattern” of self-giving love. The Holy Spirit employs these relationships to infuse the world with Christ’s redeeming Passion. Jesus enters the world in these practices again and again—only this time, through us.”<sup>18</sup> This kind of passion is not found in the youth programs models of the 1950’s. Youth need examples of what this mature passion looks like.

The problem is there is no one demonstrating or teaching youth this sacrificial love. So they find glimpse of this love in unhealthy ways. Through sex, drugs, and attention through social media. Each of these things can give them a short high, but it is nothing compared to the ecstasy found in the sacrificial love found in the intimacy with Christ. The greatest gift we can give youth is to get to know them on a deeper intimate level. To truly see them for their strengths and flaws and be willing to hold a mirror up to them so they can see for themselves who they are. This kind of intimate knowing of someone comes from a commitment to be in a youth’s life, not for a week, month or year, but for the upbringing of a youth. Not on a superficial level but on a deeper Christ loving level. The true commitment that this takes doesn’t allow for one person to do this for multiple young people, rather it should be the other way around. There needs to be multiple adults per youth. For this truly to be successful this means that the way we do ministry with youth needs to look drastically different as well as the systems that we pump our children through.

Youth ministry models should look closer to the project 51 model proposed by Chap Clark. It is a program where youth “grow up surrounded by five non-parental adults who offer long term, unearned and unfiltered social capital.”<sup>19</sup> If five adults commit long term to the success of a youth it also opens the door for all the pressure to be on one youth minister, one teacher, one coach on the success of a child. It spreads the responsibility between multiple adults allowing adults to deeply effect a handful of youth rather than passing a mass of youth through one program until the next. In return this helps to fulfill the longing of adults to pass along what they have learned through their journey making the world a better place. For true healing to occur in our society’s systems we need to strip away the isolation in our systems so we can truly connect with different generations in an intimate way.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert J Sternberg, "A triangular theory of love." *Psychological Review* 93, no. 2 (April 1986): 119. *PsycARTICLES*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 2, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Dean, *Practicing passion: Youth and the quest for a passionate church*, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> Chap Clark, “The New Normal of Isolation in Adolescence,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 13, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 88.

## **Recommendations**

After spending time and engaging with the youth, Beth, parents, and through my studies of youth work, I have a few recommendations for the church council. First, there needs to be a shift in culture within the church. Youth work should not rely on one staff member; instead, it is the responsibility of the whole congregation. Each member of the congregation should make an effort to get to know five children and youth beyond a superficial level. For example, members should ask more than ‘How are classes going?’ instead, they should be able to ask, ‘How did you do on your Math test last week?’ Second, I recommend that the church invest in adding a staff member that focuses on the integration of children and youth into the life of the church. This includes helping to bridge the gap between adults and youth. I would advise against their title including “youth minister,” this term is outdated and implies a model of youth work that will only further isolate young people from the congregation. Instead, I would encourage the church to have job descriptions around intergenerational ministry. If the church can make this cultural shift of viewing youth work as a church responsibility and add a staff member, I believe that the church will continue to see an increased strength in youth programming and mature faith development.

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