

Rev. Elizabeth Tamez Méndez
Calvin Symposium on Worship 2018
C20: Let the Times Declare! Socio-demographic Shifts and the Future of Young People in the North American Church

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Reaching the Next Generation – Ministry to Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Youth and Young Adults

By 2018, half the children under 18 years of age will be “minorities;” 26% will be Hispanic. This culturally and ethnically diverse group of young people bring a new set of needs and opportunities for ministry. Rev. Elizabeth Tamez Méndez offers an expansive conceptualization of ministry that takes into account the core needs of youth in a practical theology that is integral and holistic.

You might read the title and be tempted to turn the page, thinking your congregation or community is not culturally or ethnically diverse or that your calling in ministry is not to youth. Consider this before you stop: demographic projections point to a future that paints a different picture from the present. Youth are at the forefront of demographic changes, and churches need to consider this reality as a moment for us to seize! We have a unique opportunity to contribute to the healthy development and thriving of youth, while walking alongside them toward an encounter with Christ.

All aspects of life, including religion, are being reshaped and redefined with new racial, ethnic, and age demographic characteristics. By the year 2043, racial and ethnic “minorities” will comprise the majority of the population, leaving behind historic demographic hegemony. Currently, “minorities” comprise over half of the population under five years of age, with Hispanics accounting for 25%. By 2018, half the children under 18 years of age will be “minorities”, with 26% being Hispanic.¹

As these changes unfold, American religion encounters new needs and new opportunities in a generation of ethnically and culturally diverse youth. For many groups in the rising demographic,² religion, church, and spirituality play a central role in life. The congregation is deemed as extended family, and is a central source of social support and development. Immigrant families in particular need additional support through the taxing experience of uprooting and restarting life in a new place where social, political, cultural, and linguistic dynamics are very different.³ Our churches have a unique opportunity to serve, particularly the younger generation as they adjust to life between two cultures and form their identities.

However, the unique values and needs of “minorities” make it necessary to recognize that some current approaches and strategies to serve ethnic and cultural majority youth are not relevant or effective in connecting with diverse youth. This recognition calls for an expansive conceptualization of ministry; shifting our focus from

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retention strategies (keeping youth in the church) to developmental strategies (nurturing the individual). By revisiting our practical theology, incorporating youth development principles, and integrating simple ministry ideas, we can construct an approach to ministry that is integral, holistic, and better serves the needs of diverse youth.

An Expansive Conceptualization

Ministry is not easy, and working with youth seems particularly demanding. Among other things, it requires energy, creativity, keen ability to connect, and knowledge of the latest trends! In this challenging environment, how can a leader think about incorporating changes? One first simple step is to expand the theological concepts that inform our practice.

First, Genesis 1:27-28 and 49:1-28 provide a view of our ministerial work as an act of “multiplication” and “forming” of others.⁴ Scripture reveals the divine design of pouring the blessing of spiritual legacy from generation to generation. We do this through our authentic example, mentoring efforts, and involvement in the lives of youth.

Second, Jesus’ own journey into maturity recognizes the human development process as entailing body, mind, and soul (Luke 2:52). When a congregation provides for the whole young person, it becomes more than a place for activities or attendance. It becomes a community where youth anchor identity, have deep roots, and find opportunities to contribute.

Third, Jesus’ own ministry addressed the spiritual, physical, social, emotional, and other needs. (e.g. Mark 2:1-12; John 9). Through serving a person in as many aspects as possible, we are able to reach a greater connection and make a lasting impact. The more youth connect, the less probability they will disengage as they grow up and encounter competing responsibilities and interests.

These practical theology concepts free us to know that ministry effectiveness in reaching and serving youth does not depend on budgets, programs, curriculum, or style of worship, but rather on the ability to connect with them in a meaningful manner.⁵

Connecting with their Core Needs – Identity Formation

In understanding and tending to the developmental needs of youth, we find a pathway for ministerial practices to connect with them at a deeper level. Youth have six core needs: sense of security (psychological and emotional, support), sense of connection (physical and social), desire to learn (cognitive), identity (self, ethnic, sexual, etc.), meaning (depth, direction in life, contribution, and empowerment), and spiritual growth (transcendence, convictions, values).⁶ Youth who receive more support from adults in these six core areas are more likely to report that being religious or spiritual is important

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to them (79%). They are also more likely to engage with religious programs or events (87%). However, on average, youth surveyed only receive nurturing and support in about half of these areas.⁷

For youth, relationships (family, peers, mentors) and social contexts (school, church, work, media) are critical. Relationships form the hubs for gaining life directives and cues to form their self-concept. When we deem youth development as integral to our mission, the central questions become, “How can I pour into you? How can I show my commitment and love to you? How can I model to you my faith-walk in a lasting and meaningful way? How can I empower you to soar and reach your potential as a person?” This is what young people are craving, and these needs are met through simple acts. Our ministry can help youth thrive as persons, give them opportunity for making important contributions to their community, and develop their faith convictions.

When ministering to culturally and ethnically diverse youth, we need to know that the most salient of the six core needs is the ongoing negotiation of identity.⁸ They are in a constant process of self-discovery and answering the questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? Where is my place in my family, school, friends, community, church? As adolescents, they navigate between learning what makes one unique and the craving to “fit in”, feel accepted, and be part of the group.⁹ Having answers to their identity and societal roles are a pivotal aspect of their healthy development and sense of self.

Youth from diverse cultural and ethnic families face an additional challenge. They must navigate growing up in a family and community that provide a cultural, ethnic, and linguistic inheritance, which is now merging with the mainstream culture. Youth experience constant tension between the pressures to conform to the dominant culture and keeping their heritage culture and values. For example, mainstream culture and worldview emphasizes personal focus and individualism while their root culture highlights the family working as one unit and making collective efforts. How is a youth to negotiate these approaches, expectations, and roles on their own? In addition, the messages and cues diverse youth receive from society are often not encouraging, reaffirming, inclusive, and empowering. If you take time to listen to the stories and experiences of diverse youth, you will often find a sense of hurt, alienation, discrimination, not fitting in, and demeaning self-image.

This is the intersection where our churches can become a place of social and spiritual capital for our youth. Their unique needs and points of tension are not typically addressed in other social contexts (e.g. academic support, career coaching). When their core needs are addressed in our ministries, the redemptive work of Christ connects with them—they are able to see the depth of His work and message in every area of life. The church can provide a community where they are accepted, loved, fit in, are held in high regard, their cultural and ethnic background is valued, and they are intentionally given space to contribute actively.¹⁰ We model for them that their identity is rooted in their

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culture *and* in Christ, and that we are reconciled with God and each other (2 Cor. 5:18). We can help them understand that faith develops not solely as a result of spiritual practices, but also comes through the lived experience of everyday life – a holistic process and experience.

Following the pathway marked by the core needs of ethnically and culturally diverse youth, we find a way to accompany them in their journey towards defining who they are, their direction in life, and their faith convictions. As one participant in the conference said after discussing these dynamics: “This sounds like a congregation where we are all “youth ministers”! Everyone has a role to play and a way to contribute.”

Practical Ideas

The following ministry strategies connect concept to practice by nurturing the six core developmental needs, with a special focus on identity formation. Here, we approach ministry from an integral and holistic perspective that reaches the body, mind, and spirit, thereby serving youth spiritually, emotionally, socially, culturally, and mentally.¹¹

1. SPIRITUAL MODELING

- Strengthen and honor intergenerational relationships by organizing meetings where both adults and youth share personal stories (testimonies) of life and faith.¹²
- Make the process interactive by including food, rituals, and key locations that inspire learning.
- Also share one-on-one with personal stories about how we put our faith in action and ways we sensed God’s presence to we grow in feeling an interpersonal connection.

2. BUILDING STRONGER BONDS

- Encourage adults to take a couple of youth along with them to do simple things such as running errands. This creates space for conversations and mentoring.
- Attend their special events at school to show support.
- Ask members of the congregation to choose a youth’s name and commit to praying.
- Organize service projects (in and out of church), creating intergenerational work teams.
- Engage youth in serving as mentors to younger kids.
- Include activities where families can interact vs. individualistic activities where youth are always segregated from adults in the congregation.

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3. SERVING THEIR NEEDS

- Learn what are some of the social needs of youth in your congregation. Find ways to serve them. Are they in need of help with homework? Job mentoring? College entrance coaching?
- Take time as a congregation to celebrate and affirm important life stages and milestones: Beginning of school year, major tests, graduations, quinceañeras, new job, etc.

4. UPLIFTING THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY AND STRENGTHS

- Recognize the advantages of living in “the hyphen” (between two cultures).¹³
- Aim for a ministry where the congregation seeks to navigate and negotiate in a healthy manner the reality of diverging cultural/linguistic expressions and preferences that can arise between adults and youth (ministry of interconnectedness). There is not a formula for achieving this, as each congregation is unique. However, mutual understanding and respect is foundational.
- Draw on the wealth of knowledge and special skills that youth growing up between two cultures bring to our congregations:
 - They create a bridge towards understanding and better serving “the other culture” within the congregation and out in the community.
 - They learn to think from multiple perspectives (cultural translators).
 - They have the ability to negotiate multiple identities of faith, ethnicity, and culture.
 - They tend to have a broader worldview and openness to other groups.

5. MOBILIZING ACTIVE CONTRIBUTORS

- Welcome and include youth as vital part of the congregation, create a sense of ownership and full contribution. Youth have a desire to play an important role and be fully included – not just, “my parent’s church.”
- Shift the cultural perspective we have on youth. Deem youth as full members of the congregation, not as “kids” who will engage in the future when they reach adulthood.
- Create ways for active participation and collaboration vs. passive observance, such as helping with media needs, reading Scripture during worship, assisting in logistics, mentoring them to teach a Bible class, etc.
- Youth have much to teach us as adults. Show your willingness to listen and observe.

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- Provide opportunities to grow and exercise their leadership abilities (public speaking, leading groups, serving the community, etc.) by asking them to oversee small projects like organizing the next recreational event.

Conclusion

As the opportunity and need to serve culturally and ethnically diverse youth increases, an expansive conceptualization of ministry allows us to connect with them in a deeper manner. By taking into account the core needs of youth, and moving within a framework of practical theology that is integral and holistic, our congregations can contribute towards the healthy development and thriving of our youth, while walking along side of them towards experiencing an encounter with Christ. You can adopt simple ministerial techniques that do not require extensive training, tools, budgets, or planning, but enable us to help meet their core developmental needs. Then youth are free to open up to hear, embrace, and appropriate the spiritual life. You will be ready to accompany youth as they grow and live out their convictions.

NOTES

1. William H. Frey, Brookings Institution Analysis of US Census Bureau population projections report released December 12, 2012 based on 2010 US Census.

2. Sikkink, David, & Hernández, Edwin I. (2003). Religion Matters: Predicting Schooling Success. *Institute for Latino Studies, 2003*.

3. Martinez, J.F. (2008). *Walk with the people: Latino ministry in the United States*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

4. Park, M. S.; Rah, S.; Tizon, A. (Ed.). (2012). *Honoring the generations: Learning with Asian North American congregations*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.

5. Programs, curriculum, styles, and budgets have their valuable place in ministry. The point here is that these need to take a secondary place in our ministerial focus and efforts. The central focus being on creating deep connections with youth and tending to their core needs. We also need to consider that many of the answers we currently receive from programs and curricula are not quite fitting for the new culturally and ethnically diverse dynamics and realities we are facing. The answers are not yet fully at our fingertips, we are co-creating these as we navigate the process and gain insight in the midst of the diverse settings we are encountering.

6. Nakkula, M.J.; Toshalis, E. (2006). *Understanding youth: Adolescent development for educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

7. Search Institute. Survey study in 2003 of almost 150,000 young people in grades 6-12 throughout the United States.

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8. Smokowski, P. R., & Bacallao, M. (2011). *Becoming bicultural: Risk, resilience, and Latino youth*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

9. Nakkula, M.J.; Toshalis, E. (2006). *Understanding youth: Adolescent development for educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

10. Seefeldt, G.A. & Roehlkepartain, E.C. (2005). *Tapping the potential: Discovering congregation's role in building assets in youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

11. Roehlkepartain, J.L. & Conway, J. (2007). *Get on Board! Presentations and activities for introducing asset building in congregations*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

12. Belmonte-Stephens, A., & Jao, G. (2015). Nurturing the Next Generation. *Common Ground Journal*, 12(1), 75-82.

13. Ibid.

Recommended reading

Baker, D. G. (Ed.). (2010). *Greenhouses of hope: Congregations growing young leaders who will change the world*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute.

Dunn, R. R., & Senter III, M. H. (1997). *Reaching a generation for Christ: A comprehensive guide to youth ministry*. Chapter 18: How do we minister to youth in ethnic communities? Chicago, ILL.: Moody Press.

Tetz, M., & Hopkins, G. L. (2004). *We can keep them in the church: How to love our children so they won't leave: Success stories and ideas that really work*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press.

Johnson-Mondragón, K. (Ed.). (2007). *Pathways of hope and faith among Hispanic teens: Pastoral reflections and strategies inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion*. Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida.

Lee, J., & Zhou, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Asian American youth: Culture, identity and ethnicity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
