

VALLEY LIFE'S YOUTH: A CHALLENGE TO DISCIPLESHIP

A Little History

In 2002 a discussion was held in the Valley Life congregation about the future of our ministry to our teens. Some articles were circulated about teen ministry, written by various experienced people. Some statistics were presented about the problem of teens leaving church after high school. The deficiencies of typical youth programs were discussed and so on.

According to some surveys, it was believed that 85% or more of teens left church after high school and the various ways churches had attempted to deal with the problem, or perhaps even identify the reasons for the problem, had done little to stem the tide of disappearing youth.

Some things that many youth specialists seemed to agree on were:

1. The importance of serious relationships between teens and adults, both parents and others.
2. The importance of ministry to parents, both with the aim of their own spiritual growth and to help them be more involved with their kids in a culture in which work, school and social demands are growing on families.

In theory at least, both of these points are ones that have always been important to Valley Life, are characteristics that ought to be normal in organic churches and have often been stressed by Ed.

Among the goals the congregation agreed ought to be implemented were:

1. Encouraging teens to participate more fully in the house churches.
2. A greater effort to connect non-family adults with teens.
3. Provision of regular opportunities for teens to connect socially, perhaps to include some teaching.

I am unaware of any specific and ongoing steps that were proposed or implemented to achieve these great goals and as far as I know, no social gatherings were ever held on any regular basis.

In the years following this congregational discussion, we have “lost” in one way or another, many of the teens that were part of VLC at that time or who became teenagers later. Some of them moved away with their families and we probably know little of their spiritual development since. Some of those we have some knowledge of are adrift spiritually, some with spouses they now have. Most of these now adults do not participate in church. Others we have just lost track of. In a few cases some have drifted spiritually either while remaining in the church or after leaving, but have shown signs more recently of renewed spiritual interest. (For the latter we are very grateful and give the glory to God.) On the other hand—and significantly—several of our teens have matured into healthy Christian adults who are productive members of the church and are bearing witness to Christ in their chosen vocations.

Even though, in my opinion, the people of Valley Life and its leadership are far more serious about relationships in general, family life and spiritual growth than many churches, I believe that our record in truly discipling our children could be improved. I am making that statement in light of the material in the book I will quote from extensively below, as well as in the light of personal observations of our youth, personal involvement with some of them and conversations with parents.

None of the challenges from the book I quote, or the recommendations I make about our youth, should be interpreted as depreciating the hard work that many parents, leaders and others have done with individual kids to point them to Christ and instill biblical truth in them.

Most of all, we must understand that it is God himself--not us--as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who transforms any of us into the image of Christ. Yet we all, whether we have children in Valley Life or not, have a responsibility to respond to God's call to disciple others, and more than any we must disciple the children in our midst.

In Valley Life we want our children to stick to Jesus for life. I carry a burden on my own heart to do the same and also have a concern about the deficiencies in our results so far. Therefore, I bring before us a challenge to re-examine our situation and to consider what I believe to be some wise thoughts from others, to have a frank and loving conversation about our kids and to commit ourselves to serious intentional efforts to do a better spiritual job with the teens we have now and those who will be teens before we know it.

“Almost Christian”: The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)

A while ago I encountered a book called Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the Church. It tells the story of the National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted from 2002-2005, the most ambitious study on adolescent spirituality ever in the United States. The study involved extensive interviews of 3,300 plus teens between thirteen and seventeen, face-to-face follow up interviews with a smaller number, and telephone interviews of their parents.

The book was written by a pastor and youth minister, who also teaches youth ministry in a major American seminary and was one of the individuals who conducted the study.

The emotions I felt as I read the results of the NSYR, and their interpretation by the book's author, ranged from discouragement through disappointment to hopefulness and a sense of immense challenge, a challenge to learn why many youth fail to find or consistently pursue faith, and to learn how to more effectively introduce to them to faith and nurture it to maturity.

In the following pages you will read about some of the key results of the NSYR and a number of the author's conclusions, interpretations and ministry insights. I believe that a serious consideration of the lessons of the NSYR could make a major contribution to the spiritual health, not only of our youth, but of our whole body.

As I present these results and the author's interpretations, I will add my own thoughts and convictions about the issues addressed. I will also write about my own experience of mentoring teens and passion for developing an intentional plan to provide adult mentors for as many of Valley Life teens and preteens as possible.

You will see that the researchers in the NSYR concluded that the faith of the majority of adolescents professing Christian beliefs is seriously defective and fails to meet even the most minimum standards of the Christianity of the Bible. The author lays the blame for this defective faith squarely on the door step of the adults in American churches. I believe that, taken as a whole, we at Valley Life have a much more vibrant, more clearly biblical faith than that found in most of the adolescents encountered in the NSYR. Yet we are still tending to "lose" our own teens, as seems to be the case in the bulk of American churches.

Learning from the NSYR: First Wave Findings

To give you an initial sense of what the researchers learned about teens and their faith perspectives, I will list five crucial findings from the first wave of the study, which consisted of the original face-to-face interviews with the 3,300 teens and was the portion of the study with which the author of Almost Christian was most closely associated.

"1. Most American teenagers have a positive view of religion but otherwise don't give it much thought."

The gist of this finding was that teens are not antagonistic to religion, don't fight about it, are tolerant of differing religious viewpoints, but do not actively seek a religious identity.

"2. Most teenagers mirror their parents' religious faith."

"The 'breaking away' from authority figures associated with the teenage years comes later in adolescence, but thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds in the NSYR were highly conventional, content to adopt their parents' religious inclinations." This finding indicates that "parents are by far the most important predictors of teenagers' religious lives."

One of the most important conclusions of the NSYR was that **"the best way for youth to become more serious about religious faith is for parents to become more serious about theirs."**

"3. Teenagers lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience in the world."

This does not mean highly technical language about doctrines or liturgy, but common terms and phrases that "ordinary" adult Christians would use (or *ought* to be able to use easily). Such terms and phrases would be contained in descriptions of "justification by faith," "the Trinity," what happened at Pentecost or what "original sin" is. Yet, the same teens who were tongue-tied about faith language could talk clearly—and much—about such things as money, family, sex and relationships.

“4. A minority of American teenagers—but a significant minority—say religious faith is important, and that it makes a difference in their lives. These teenagers are doing better in life on a number of scales, compared to their less religious peers.”

“Forty percent of all young people deem religion important enough to practice regularly.... One in twelve (8%) can be described as ‘highly devoted’ (e.g., they attend religious services weekly or more, they feel very close to God, they participate in a religious youth group, they read Scripture, pray frequently, and say faith is very important in their lives.)”

The author says that this group is the one most closely studied for the book, “in order to learn why faith is more significant for them than for their peers.”

Significantly, “Mormon teenagers attach the most importance to faith and are most likely to fall in the category of highly devoted youth....” The meaning of “highly devoted” is given a lot of space later in the book. Other than Mormon youth, the most highly devoted were judged to be, in order, “conservative Protestant and black Protestant teenagers, followed...by mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic [and] Jewish...teenagers.”

I have chosen not to highlight the Mormons in the NSYR, and in the book’s discussion, for certain reasons, although the diligence of Mormon parents in raising their children may be well worth studying.

The author issues two qualifications to the judgment of “highly devoted” and these qualifications are much discussed in the rest of the book. These qualifications are: “(1) participating in any identity-bearing community, religious or otherwise, improves young people’s likeliness to thrive; and (2) human ideas of ‘doing better’ usually require conforming to social norms that sometimes contravene religious teachings.” In other words, merely being attached, even devotedly, to a church, does not mean either that such a church is living out a serious biblical Christianity or that, if it is, such influence necessarily translates into a teen faith that can weather the challenges of the surrounding culture.

5. Many teenagers enact and espouse a religious outlook that is distinct from traditional teachings of most world religions—an outlook called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Learning from the NSYR: What in the world is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?

While the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (hereafter abbreviated MTD) is rather cumbersome, it describes well the limp, dishwatery religion that the researchers of the NSYR concluded a majority of American teens were professing when asked to describe their religious beliefs and experiences.

The label MTD was apparently coined by the NSYR’s research team. The author of *Almost Christian* summarizes the beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as follows:

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.

2. God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Here is my own interpretation of the elements of MTD:

Moralistic: providing good advice for successful living, with little or no immediate accountability for one's behavior and little reference to the God of the Bible.

Therapeutic: MTD is a religion that is more about psychology than faith and helps people become "nice" rather than holy.

Deism: Much like the eighteenth century faux-Christianity (deism) that developed in Europe, MTD believes in a god who is "up THERE," but not "down HERE," the "clockmaker god" who created the universe, wound it up, then went on a very long coffee break and is not involved with the life of the world in any identifiable way. This is not the God of the Bible. In fact, Thomas Jefferson, probably America's best-known deist, took scissors to the Bible and eliminated everything but the "moral" teachings of Jesus. (He liked the Sermon on the Mount, for example, but not the stuff about miracles and death on a cross.)

You will immediately recognize MTD as a religion of no atonement for sin, no rescue from condemnation, no accountability for behavior and no true hope for a meaningful future in this life or the next. It is also narcissistic and treats God as a cosmic butler or maid who comes at our beck and call to bail us out of our screw-ups or discouragements.

In a section titled "What's Wrong With Nice?" the author of Almost Christian reproduces a quote from another book written about the NSYR: "Edward, a Hispanic seventeen-year-old from California, described his church as a place that is 'warm and welcoming and people are nice. Little groups...send you get-well cards and stuff.'"

Our author comments: "The Bible has much to say about kindness and compassion but says nothing at all about being nice."

"Teenagers tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life. Religion, the young people in the NSYR concurred, is a 'Very Nice Thing'."

"What we have been less able to convey to young people is faith. In Christian tradition, faith is a matter of desire, a desire for God and a desire to love others in Christ's name—which results in a church oriented toward bearing God's self-giving love to others, embodied in a gospel-shaped way of life."

In contrast to the faith just described, the author says: “After two and a half centuries of shacking up with the ‘American dream,’ churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. These theological proxies gnaw, termite-like, at our identity as the Body of Christ, eroding our ability to recognize that Jesus’ life of self-giving love directly challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization.”

Beyond the NSYR: What is the remedy for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?: Developing Missional Imagination and Practices for Consequential Faith

The central interest of Almost Christian: “[H]ow can the twenty-first-century church better prepare young people steeped in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism for the trust-walk of Christian faith?”

“First, all the news from the NSYR is not bad. As noted above, about 8% of the teens interviewed in the NSYR were classified as “highly devoted.” These youth seem to share what the author calls a “consistent set of cultural tools that make faith meaningful. Specifically, highly devoted teenagers have an articulated God-story (their stated or unstated ‘creed’), a deep sense of belonging in their faith communities, a clear sense that their lives have a God-given purpose, and an attitude of hope that the world is moving in a good direction because of God. These tools seem to help young people resist Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and supply scaffolding for ‘consequential’ faith—a faith that matters enough to issue in a distinctive identity and way of life.” Below is a brief description of cultural tools.

What are cultural tools, how are they used and what are their limitations?

1. Cultural tools are “the symbols, stories, rituals, relationships, and worldviews that we pick up from our experience of the world around us—our default operating system—and [which we use] to construct meaning and guide our actions in the world....”
2. Specifically *religious* cultural tools are those that determine and define *moral order*, such as moral teachings, spiritual experiences and religious role models; *skills*, such as learning how to function in the religious community, ability to cope with spiritual and cultural challenges (problem solving).
3. “Highly devoted [religious] young people seem adept at using at least four cultural tools in ways that mark them as members of their traditions: (1) they confess their tradition’s *creed*, or God-story; (2) they belong to a *community* that enacts the God-story; (3) they feel *called* by this story to contribute to a larger purpose; and (4) they have *hope* for the future promised by this story. In addition, these youth seem to have families and churches that model—convincingly—that these tools matter....” (author’s italics)
4. “Cultural tools do not guarantee faith and “are not ‘magic bullets’ for faith formation. The ‘form’ implied in Christian formation is Jesus Christ. Christian communities employ cultural tools in order to imitate Christ, believing that the Holy Spirit’s presence in human communities can alter these human tools into vehicles of divine grace and transformation.” Yet the proper use of cultural tools “*also*

“requires the people nearest to teenagers—parents, youth leaders, pastors, congregations, interested adults—to use these cultural tools as well.” (italics mine)

“For Christians...consequential faith cannot be reduced to the work of cultural tools. Christians view faith as God’s gift, and the church’s cultural tools help us own and consolidate our identities as people who follow Jesus Christ, and who enact his love for the world. In Christian tradition, mature faith *bears fruit*. But this kind of generative faith requires missional imagination, which is strikingly absent from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. (italics mine)

“But now we must change our lens back from sociology to theology. At some point, a peculiar God-story must *set the terms* for how teenagers use religion’s cultural tools.” (author’s italics) “In Christian tradition, Christ does not simply bless our cultural toolkits; he *enters the world* through them. The goal of Christian formation is not church membership, but a more perfect love of God and neighbor. Jesus did not call people to come to church; he called people to *follow him*.” (my italics)

Generative faith and missional imagination

“The delusion that human effort can generate mature faith—in young people or anybody else—is as old as fiction itself.”

“In the end, cultural tools can provide support beams for, but *not the content of*, consequential Christian faith. Christians believe that faith depends on the electrifying presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives cultural tools their holy momentum.” (italics mine)

Generative faith is faith that is mature in its understanding and personal appropriation of not only the truth of Scripture, but also the experience of the life-giving power of Christ birthed in Christians by the Holy Spirit. Generative faith is also fruit-bearing—reaching outside of itself in practical, sacrificial love and in witness to the life-giving power of Christ that the Christian has experienced.

The church assists the Holy Spirit in producing generative faith in its youth and in helping youth use the cultural tools the church provides. Churches do this by “plunging teenagers into Christianity’s peculiar God-story, and by inviting young people to take part in practices that embody it. For centuries, these two strategies—telling God’s story and enacting it—comprised the heart of Christian formation, or catechesis, the ‘handing on’ of a faith tradition from one generation to the next.”

“Catechesis,” an unfamiliar term to many evangelicals, is not only the act of casual talking about Christ and faith around the house, vital though that is. It is the effort to find ways and times of deliberate, intentional focus on the truth of Scripture, teaching about what “cash value” faith has in the realities of life, modeling the life of faith by adults, and involving teens practically in the life-affirming activities of the church, perhaps especially in its outreach to those outside.

It is this “handing on” of the faith which occupies the remainder of Almost Christian.

The Gospel’s Missionary Impulse

The church is missional if it is anything. While catechesis does not do the work of the Holy Spirit that causes teens to follow Jesus, “[c]atechesis shapes missional imaginations, which help us recognize God’s activity in Jesus Christ and in us, as Christ calls us to participate in his redemptive work in the world. Catechesis clarifies the church’s understanding of who God is; shapes our ability to participate in the Christian community; provides the means for discerning our call as disciples and for claiming our hope in God’s future. Catechesis, therefore, gives teenagers cultural tools that stake up young faith, improve teenagers’ exposure to the Son and therefore the likelihood that their faith will mature and bear fruit.”

“Christianity...has a boundary-crossing, outward-reaching, other-oriented impulse modeled by Jesus himself,” first realized by the church when the fire of the Spirit came on Pentecost, but prefigured by Jesus earlier when he gave the disciples the simple, but astonishing, command: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

Catechesis is nothing more or less than the process of discipleship, seeking to turn what would otherwise be self-absorbed, entertainment-focused youth into bearers of spiritual fruit who carry the life of Christ out into the world of their peers and into their larger community as they participate with the rest of the church in transforming their culture.

“The missionary nature of the church rules out Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as a substitute for Christian faith. In contrast to MTD’s agenda of personal fulfillment, Christian discipleship enacts the inside-out logic of a self-giving God, whose power is weakness, who deems love worthy of suffering and who promises that life will spring from death.”

“Christian identity is not determined by our oddity as a religion, but by Jesus Christ, whose Incarnation is evidence that God is not a distant, disinterested entity but a living, invested, passionate Being who relentlessly loves us, forgives us, and drenches our lives in grace.” (author’s italics) (No deist god here!)

“In Christ’s hands, the cultural tools of highly devoted teenagers become fields for divine-human interaction, vehicles God uses to enter the world through young people themselves.”

There is always a risk of teens borrowing belief from their parents and to some extent some of that is inevitable and even normal. The danger is what too often seems to become the case down the road: teens never develop a faith of their own and what is borrowed wears out in the rough and tumble of the real world. The proof in the pudding—or I might say, the proof that teen faith is the real thing--is when that belief begins to shape their relationships, control their decision making and fuel their passion for life outside the home and church. The frequency of teen failure to develop a lasting faith is a serious issue and I think that more effort should be made by parents and church leaders to understand its roots and dynamics.

What about creeds?

“Creed” is another term not all that common in evangelical language, which the author of Almost Christian defines as “articulated beliefs” and which most evangelicals call a “Statement of Faith.”

As stated earlier, most of the teens interviewed in the NSYR, whether evangelicals or affiliated with the so-called old “mainline” Protestant denominations, were not able to articulate clearly what they or their church believed—the theological statements summarizing critical doctrines usually itemized in a statement of faith. I suspect the same is characteristic of most of the youth who have been in Valley Life.

One of the reasons for understanding the theology of our faith is so that we can evaluate the worldviews in our surrounding culture and articulate what we believe to those whose worldviews contradict or water down what the Bible teaches about how we and the world got here, what went wrong that plunged the world into the chaos of evil and what the solution is to that problem. (These are the three issues of creation, fall and redemption on which Ed taught recently).

The author says: “When I talk about ‘creeds’ of highly devoted Christian teenagers, I am referring to what they think and say about God, whether or not it is formally summarized. In other words, do teenagers describe a God who is worth following? Highly devoted Christian teenagers espouse creeds that are unabashedly personal; more often than other teenagers, they describe God as being concerned *for* them and powerfully involved *with* them—a stance precisely opposite that of classical deism.” (author’s italics)

The author also reports: “The important distinction between the objectives of highly devoted Christian teenagers and their peers was simply that [the highly devoted] did not think about their actions or their futures simply in terms of what *they* wanted. They considered themselves morally bound to contribute to God’s purpose for the world.” (author’s italics)

“While MTD teenagers swapped divine power for divine approval, highly devoted Christian youth refused to separate divine love and power. They commonly described God’s power as parental discipline, a justified form of judgment because it is motivated by parental care.”

Do the teens of Valley Life—past and present—use clear and biblically accurate language when talking about their relationship to God? Do we even know what language they would use—which leads to the more basic question: do we ever *ask* them to articulate their understanding of and relationship to God? Do parents? Do other adults?

Have we adults—either as a result of our emphasis on “organic” principles or because of the evangelical history of poor habits of teaching doctrine—failed to teach our youth about the critical doctrines of our faith?

If “no” is the answer to this question, perhaps we should consider some means of better instruction for our youth.

The importance of parents

The author writes that “the NSYR [concluded] that the best way for youth to become more serious about religious faith is for parents to become more serious about theirs.” “Research is nearly unanimous on this point: parents matter most in shaping the religious lives of their children.” “[T]here is no doubt that teenagers’ appreciation of a life-orienting God-story, and their ability to discern God’s ongoing movement in their lives and their communities are heavily influenced by *adults’* appreciation of such a story and *adults’* ways of discerning and responding to the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives.” “Teenagers’ ability to imitate Christ depends, to a daunting degree, on whether we do.” (author’s italics)

“Herein lies the rub. Many adults lack confidence in articulating, much less teaching, their own faith. What if parents and [church teachers] are *no more religiously prepared than teenagers are?* How do we speak with conviction about faith that we have trouble explaining ourselves?” (italics mine)

The importance of Christian community

A lot of discussion and teaching has taken place in the past few years in Valley Life on the topic of Christian community. As with parents’ concern for their children’s faith, I believe that the people of our church are taking more and more seriously the issues of spiritual intimacy with one another and the bonding with and serving one another that are marks of serious community life. In the NSYR these characteristics were found to be *second only to the role of parents* in favorably shaping the spiritual lives of youth.

The author writes: “Sociologists consider a young person’s sense of belonging in a religious community to be a more accurate predictor of his or her adult religious involvement than regular church attendance. Caring congregations help teenagers develop what social scientists call ‘connectedness,’ a developmental asset accrued from participating in the *relational matrix* of *authoritative communities*—communities that provide young people with available adults, mutual regard, boundaries, and shared long term objectives. Highly devoted teenagers [in the NSYR] readily defended Christianity’s communal aspects.”

The author italicized “authoritative communities” above; I italicized “relational matrix” to emphasize what we at Valley Life have always affirmed: the relational character of the Christian faith in general and the local church in particular. I hardly need to quote Scripture on this point, for not only is this a feature of the people of Israel—no matter how often they quarreled with one another—but it is rock-bottom fundamental to the teaching not only of Paul, but Jesus himself, so we do not need sociologists to tell us this. (See just these few of many references: 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:15-16, 29-32.)

“Congregations are important sources of both interpersonal and spiritual support for highly devoted Christian teenagers. Peer relationships matter. Religious teenagers’ closest friends tend to be other religious teenagers.... Yet equally important are *adults who befriend teenagers*. Compared to their peers, young church-attenders are far more likely to have adults in their lives with whom they enjoy talking, and who give them lots of encouragement (79% versus 53% of nonattending teens).” (italics mine)

“Yet highly devoted Christian youth viewed their congregations as more than interpersonal support systems. Overwhelmingly, they valued their churches’ spiritual as well as social connections. They wanted to be valued by the people in their congregations, but they also longed to belong to God. So they found in their churches evidence of God’s confidence in them—a confidence mediated by people who loved and trusted them.”

Mentoring teens: modeling the faith one-on-one

Earlier I said that as I consider catechesis—handing on the faith to new generations--it seems to me that it really is the process of discipleship, the process of transforming new or young believers into life-long followers of Jesus, followers who not only understand the truths of Scripture, but who are growing in their personal fellowship with Christ, producing the fruit of the Spirit and doing deeds that reveal a changed life, people, in other words, who are experiencing generative faith.

Of course, the master discipler is Jesus himself. He called twelve men from tax gathering, fishing and other occupations—*ordinary* men with *ordinary* jobs (nothing special here)—to eat and drink with him, travel dusty roads with him from town to town to witness *extraordinary* things as the Son of God and Man not only taught them in words about himself and his Father, but showed them in deeds how *they* to do great things in his name because they had been with him.

The next greatest disciple-maker was Paul. The best example is his relationship with Timothy, whom he commends to the Corinthians as “my faithful son in the Lord” (1 Cor. 4:17), and who learned what being missional was all about by accompanying Paul on his second and third missionary journeys and who learned enough by watching and assisting Paul to be trusted by Paul to lead the church in Ephesus, thereby becoming the pastoral model for all of Christian history.

Within the community model of the church there can be no greater model than that of the one-on-one discipler/mentor.

My dictionary defines “mentor” as an “**Experienced adviser and supporter** somebody, usually older and more experienced, who provides advice and support to, and watches over and fosters the progress of, a younger, less experienced person”

Sounds like both Jesus and Paul to me. It is also the ordinary Christian man or woman who will give his or her time to both show and tell a younger Christian, who is not his or her own child, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The author of *Almost Christian* writes of the experience of attempting to set up a teen mentoring program in a local church and of the adults who suddenly vanished when approached with the idea of being mentors.

The author first thought that these folks “were afraid of teenagers (an explanation I frequently hear when adults are reluctant to work with youth). . . .” But these folks were engaged in many other efforts

with youth, such as coaching soccer teams and leading Girl Scout troops. “What these potential mentors seemed to be afraid of was *faith*. They lacked confidence in their own faith formation and had no idea how to bring up the subject with youth. They succumbed to a common misunderstanding that teaching the gospel requires us to create a curriculum rather than translate a tradition, that we need to “make the story interesting” rather than invite teenagers to enact it alongside us.” (my italics) Eventually, three adults and three youth were paired.

While mentoring—discipling Christian youth—must be biblically based, it is less about *what* you know and more about *who* you know—Jesus. It is Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, who does the transforming; it is the mentor who translates, mostly what he or she *is* in the faith and a some of what he or she *knows* of Christian truth.

(Note: to avoid unnecessary wordiness in the rest of this section, I’m going to refer to the mentor as “she” rather as “he or she.” Sorry, guys!)

“The earliest form of discipleship education (and as Paul’s relationship with young Timothy reveals, the earliest form of *youth ministry*) was apprenticeship. Talking about Jesus is no substitute for following him...; yet talking about Jesus is necessary to claim and confess our identity in Christ, and to discern through the community of faith the footprints we should follow. People who ‘speak Christian’...speak the truth in love; *it is this speech, not doctrinal sophistication...*, that marks the mature follower of Jesus. Young people who learn to speak Christian learn it from experienced Christians. Youth are apprentices in a community that talks about Jesus—and for that matter the Holy Spirit, sin, redemption and many other Christian non-negotiables--not just ‘God’--and where people testify to what it costs to love Jesus and to *love others because of him.*” (italics mine)

So some measure of acquaintance with the critical doctrines of the faith and Christian language about a relationship with Jesus and fellow Christians is essential for young people, both to assure adults that they understand what it means to be a Jesus follower and to be able to share accurately with others what knowing Jesus is all about. “Teenagers who have trouble articulating what they believe *about* God also seem to have trouble forging a significant connection *to* God—and youth who do not have a language *for* Christ are unlikely to imagine an identity *in* Christ.” (author’s italics)

“Most teenagers have few structured opportunities to eavesdrop on the grammar, vocabularies, habits, virtues, or practices of mature Christian adults.” I believe that these opportunities are possible in Valley life to an extent probably less common in most churches and this is so because so much of our “church life” includes teens and adults together.

As the author found out when attempting to introduce mentoring in the local church, “mentoring models of Christian formation are difficult to pull off primarily because so few adults are willing—not because they lack the interest, but because they lack spiritual vocabularies, and therefore confidence, to convey their religious convictions to another person.”

The remedy for this problem is both better theological education and more consistent Bible study among adults. At some point in every Christian’s life a true love of the Scripture, gained through

regular study and interaction with other believers, must lead to a deeper immersion in the Word. The sooner this love and this immersion is attained in young people, the more likely they will live a long life of spiritual passion. If adults have not attained this, they will be much less able to inspire youth to follow. But it is *passion for the Word*, and not theological sophistication, that is needed to engage youth in conversations about Jesus. If the “Jesus experience” of adults is not real and growing, no amount of theological knowledge will help youth grow either.

What have we learned so far from these thoughts on mentoring?

“First, we can expect most teenagers to respond positively to adults (including parents) who take them under their wing to practice meaningful discipleship.

“Second, apprenticeships benefit more than the apprentice.” As youth grow in spiritual maturity they contribute to the mentor and to the faith of the whole community, confirming Paul’s critical doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).

“Finally..., teenagers learn to articulate faith by hearing adults articulate theirs. This brings us back to our familiar problem: American adults may be no more religiously articulate than their children....” While I believe that we at Valley Life are reasonably articulate, we can always do better.

Can entering a mentoring relationship be a bit scary at first? Yes. Will you feel inadequate? Yes. Good! Will it require a little sacrifice of your time and convenience—maybe a missed NFL game or a little sleep on Saturday morning? Yes. Small price to pay for seeing a young woman mature in faith, perhaps to a point where *she can become a mentor, also*. (Remember, we’re talking about reproduction.)

The small sacrifice also pales when the mentor eventually realizes that she is benefiting at least as much as the youth she is spending time with. The mentor will not only grow in faith as she is challenged to share her own faith with her companion, but may well form a spiritual bond that may last for years or even for a lifetime. Once again, small sacrifice.

Earlier I mentioned my own experience in discipling teens. I have mentored at least five young men over the years--four in years past (in another city), one currently. In the cases of the four, I have heard directly or indirectly from all of them, in some cases more than once, years later, that they still recall fondly our times together as beneficial to them. As far as I know, all of these men are following Christ, serving in their churches and raising Christian families (the work of Christ, with myself as the translator). I consider my experiences with them to be some of the greatest of my life.

I have experienced all the inadequacy and all the small inconveniences the mentor goes through and I wouldn’t trade them, or the results in these men’s lives, for anything.

Chapter six of *Almost Christian* details some of the principles of mentoring Christian youth and I recommend them for further study.

I have been told that a number of young adults in Valley Life have told others that certain older adults had an impact on their lives when they were teens. This is good news and shows that adults in this church care about youth that are not their own children. As far as I know, these efforts by adults were not formalized into regular encounters with the youth whom they influenced. Clearly, even one-off and occasional encounters between adults and youth have had significant effect in Valley Life.

Of course, Ed has spent time with many teens in Valley Life, but he does not have the time to do that on a regular basis with many. I am doing that with one young person and that's about my limit.

How much more effect might there be if a few more adults would commit to spending time on a regular basis with some of our teens and pre-teens? For several years we have had few of these among us. More have appeared recently. We just have to assist their parents—and the Holy Spirit—in making lifelong disciples of them.

Clearly I am a fan of mentoring and I know it works. I strongly recommend that other adults of Valley Life consider becoming mentors to more of our youth.

What can we do to improve the Christian formation of our teens?

1. Mentoring, of course.
2. By involving teens in more direct participation in the ministries of the church. This can happen in directly involving teens in leading in our inwardly-oriented ministries, that is, our Sunday evening meetings and our house churches, and in outwardly-oriented ministry, such as community helps ministry, ministry to the homeless or possibly by finding some way to assist students in the public high schools our teens attend. I'm sure other folks can think of other ways.
3. Still another way of involving teens within our gatherings would be to encourage them to share their "testimonies." (This, too, could reveal how articulate they are about their faith.) Of course, that implies that adults should be sharing theirs, too, which does not happen in Valley Life in any designated or formal sense, although we share lots of informal testimonies.

Of course, speaking in public can be terrifying for many people, including teens. Not everyone will do it, no matter how much they are encouraged or prodded. Some will do it readily. Others may need some coaching about what to say and how to say it. Why not use such opportunities to help people develop new skills?

4. Christian camps and conferences, such as Operation Barnabas, provide both social opportunities and spiritual challenge for teens. I don't know what the quality of Operation Barnabas is; I do know that it is rather expensive. I also know that it has never been consistently promoted in Valley Life. There must also be cross-denominational camps and conferences available.

5. Mission trips, which some of our teens have experienced. Speaking of being inarticulate, over the few years our teens went first to Puerto Rico and then three times to Mexico, then shared on Sunday

nights about their experiences, I noticed clear improvement in their ability to articulate what they did and what they learned.

Almost Christians contains numerous suggestions (in chapters 7-8) for developing testimony and making the most of the experiences of mission trips.

6. Social opportunities. One of the decisions made by Valley Life about ten years ago was to attempt to integrate our teens with the adult life of the church, in particular with the house churches, rather than to create specific teen-oriented ministries—although there was also an intent to create some social opportunities for the teens. The first of these intentions has been accomplished to a degree; the second did not happen.

We have probably not done a very good job of coping with the “herd mentality” of teens and their desire to hang with their peers. I believe that we should not see their social desire as a liability. While I agree that our teens should be integrated with our adults in as many ways as possible, we should not ignore their desires to be with one another socially and should capitalize on it, turning it into a tool for not only ministering to the teens, but to minister to the larger church and to those outside the church.

If we use serious tools like those described in Almost Christian to improve the approach of Valley Life to discipling our youth, we should have no qualms in creating ways for them to hang out socially. That can certainly be done without creating a formal “youth group.”

What have we (hopefully) learned from this journey through Almost Christian?: Some concluding thoughts

The author says that as she came to the end of the NSYR project she concluded that (1) When it comes to dull and uninspiring Christianity, teenagers aren’t the problem; the church is the problem and (2) The church also has the solution. Ephesians talks about equipping the church for ministry, an equipping in which the Holy Spirit has given the church all the gifts it needs to do this work. This means that we at Valley Life have no excuse for not getting more serious about training up our youth to be Christ-followers for life.

The solution to which the author refers is to use every technique (the spiritual gifts and cultural tools we have available) to develop highly devoted congregations and highly devoted youth. Almost Christian contains many of those techniques. Any serious congregation and its leaders should be able to think of others.

In final thoughts about MTD, the author writes: “MTD would probably be less insidious if we did not go around calling it Christian. If we recognized it as another faith altogether, we could step outside of it, if we wished, to examine it...[and] employ all the church’s missional imagination to address it.” With MTD masquerading as Christianity and having consistently fooled so many churches, this is difficult to do. “Several contributors to my email deluge [comments on MTD that the author solicited from pastors and youth leaders] thought it was nearly impossible for teenagers (or adults) to grasp, in

the words of a college chaplain, ‘the pervasiveness of the American Gospel of Consumerism’ while living in it.”

“Oddly, I leave this project strangely hopeful. The best news about MTD is that teenagers do not buy it as faith. They buy *into* it—it shapes them nicely for fitting into American society, since it conforms so neatly to America’s dominant cultural ethos. Youth and parents are correct if they think that MTD will outfit them better for success in American society than Christianity will. Those who want to succeed in American life, and attain high levels of visibility in it, will find that being theologically bland helps immeasurably. Yet the gospel is very clear: God wants to liberate us from being defined by these circumstances, so that we are free to follow Jesus regardless of the culture we call home.” (author’s italics)

“What can we learn from those faith communities in which young people consistently demonstrate consequential faith?”

1. It can be done.

2. “Religious faith is not an accident. Teenagers reporting high degrees of religious devotion did not get that way on their own; their faith is the legacy of communities that have invested time, energy, and love in them, and where the religious faith of adults (especially parents) inspires the faith of their children.”

3. “The cultural tools associated with consequential faith are available in every Christian faith community,” especially in those “where the governing theology...highlights, in word and deed, those aspects of the Christian story that speak to God’s personal and powerful nature, the interpersonal and spiritual significance of the faith community, the centrality of Christian vocation, and the hope that the world is ultimately in good hands. At the same time, the mere presence of these cultural tools does not ensure consequential faith in young people or anyone else. The *power of the Holy Spirit* activates missional imaginations and thus empowers the church to resist and overwhelm self-focused spiritualities with the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. (italics mine)

4. “Consequential faith has risks. The love of Christ is the love that is worth dying for. Congregations are far more reluctant to ask this kind of faith of teenagers than teenagers are to respond to it.

5. “Fifth, we are called to participate in the imagination of a sending God, which is different from reinventing the church through our own creativity. A God-shaped imagination is bent on the redemption of the world and not just the church—which places self-serving spiritualities like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism on notice. The single most important thing the church can do to cultivate missional imagination in young people is to develop one *as a church*, reclaiming our call to follow Christ into the world as envoys of God’s self-giving love.” (italics mine)

By way of my personal conclusions, I would like to highlight the author’s third point above. I believe that Valley Life does have the governing theology the author describes. In other words, we have the right biblical “stuff” to do the job. This is the best starting (or re-starting) point a church can have for

the task of discipling teens into spiritual maturity. Having that foundation—God-given, not ginned up by human means—we can partner with the Holy Spirit in producing highly devoted Christian teens.

Quotations are from Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the Church, by Kenda Creasy Dean