Tips for Discipling Teenagers

Thriving congregations focus their ministry to and with young people and their families on discipleship, witness, and service. They emphasize forming faith on a daily basis. Listed below are several “marks and means” of discipleship emerged from the Exemplary Youth Ministry Study.

- **Disciples Know Jesus Christ:** Discipleship is grounded in the teachings, life, death, resurrection, and Lordship of Jesus Christ alive and present. Disciples are in relationship with Christ, learn about Christ, and follow Christ’s leading. In the vast majority of congregations in the study, youth ministry is consciously designed to cultivate a relationship with Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, community-building, study, retreats, and service.

- **Disciples Know the Bible:** Discipleship is anchored in Bible study. It is in the Bible that youth learn the story, the truth, that shapes the life of faith. Most popular Bible studies are small group conversational explorations of the Scripture texts in which youth and their leaders “hear” God speaking truth to their lives.

- **Disciples Know the Christian Faith:** Discipleship is learning the Christian faith. The Christian faith has a history, traditions, beliefs, and values that are critical to its shaping and transforming power. Congregations are committed to teaching young people the content of the Christian faith through a variety of ministry experiences. Adult leaders guide young people in exploring the long and rich life of the people of God, creating more sturdy beliefs, engaging the tough questions, and assisting youth in finding their own “faith voice.”

- **Disciples Make Faith a Way of Life:** Discipleship is the “knowledge of faith” becoming a way of life. Discipleship is regularly described as much in languages of the “heart” and the “hands” as of the “head.” It’s not enough for young people to know the content of Scripture or to understand the richness of Christian beliefs. The adults and youth must explore ways to “live into” faith that is simultaneously centered in God yet genuinely their own.

- **Disciples are Mentored:** Discipleship is formed in relationships with mentoring individuals and communities. Even though discipleship is primarily a faith-relationship in which Christ is at the center, adolescent disciples are formed in relationship with other Christians. Whole congregations become intergenerational crucibles in which conversation, relationships, and practices wrap youth in a culture of “knowing and doing God.” Within these congregations, people walk intentionally alongside young people providing diverse, concrete “snapshots” about following Jesus as these mentors encourage and equip young people through their presence, speech, and action.

- **Disciples are Equipped:** A young person’s strengths and gifts of the Spirit are integral to discipleship. To follow Christ involves a call to witness to and serve others. To make disciples is to identify a teenager’s spiritual gifts and equip that teenager for service in the church and the world. Congregations combine study, fellowship, personal strengths, and spiritual gift discovery with service to equip youth to follow Jesus in the church and into the world.

The article, “Goldilocks in Our Midst: Ministry with Young Adolescents,” states that adolescents want and need:

1. To be respected and accepted for who they are at this stage of life.
2. To be involved and active (physically, mentally, and socially).
3. To know the expectations and guidelines in a clear, concise, and concrete manner.
4. To understand the “why”; they are curious beings, yet often struggle to comprehend abstract concepts.
5. To be challenged to grow and stretch their abilities, with the guidance and support of caring adults.
6. To matter to someone and know they matter; to feel connected and cared about—relationships are key.
7. To be acknowledged and valued for who they are as well as what they do.
8. To contribute in positive ways and be given opportunities to share their gifts and make a difference for good.
9. To be affirmed and appreciated in their attempts, successes, and even failures.
10. To express themselves through ideas, opinions, preferences, doubts, and dreams.
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**FIVE THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE NEED**
(from chapter 4 of Kenda Creasy Dean's book, *Almost Christian*)

1. **A creed to believe in** - the articulated beliefs that young people develop and defend. Young people need a sense of certainty about their faith. Statements of faith from their community of faith are powerful statements of God’s involvement and concern for their lives.
2. **A community to belong to** - peer involvement as well as relationships with other adults who befriend them and who give them lots of encouragement.
3. **A call to live out** - a sense that students exist for a purpose greater than themselves; that they are on earth to be the hands and feet of Jesus in helping and serving others.
4. **A hope to build on** - inspire and equip toward a confidence that this world is not all there is, that there is a promised “next,” and that God controls the future of this world and the next.
5. **A world to share with** - an essential mark of maturity in Christians is generativity. Mature faith bears fruit.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY MINISTRY TO YOUNG PEOPLE**

- **Integration into a congregation’s worship, mission, and discipleship formation at every level.** Teenagers need people to reflect back to them who they are. This “mirroring” is basic to the process of identity formation. Only in the church do young people begin to see themselves through the eyes of people who try to see them as God sees them: beloved, blessed, called. Interaction with Christian peers is part of this process, but adults are significant mirrors as well. Separating youth out from the larger congregation is both theologically irresponsible and a pragmatic mistake. Segmenting youth exclusively into “youth activities” leads young people to associate church with their peer groups — making “graduation” into the intergenerational faith community extremely difficult.

- **An authentic, fun, and passionate community of belonging.** It doesn’t really matter if youth participate in a youth group, a choir, a drama troupe, a Bible study, a parachurch organization, or even the congregation as a whole. But teenagers need to feel like the church is a place they belong, and not just attend.

- **A culture of creativity.** Young people need practice in multiple “faith languages” — words and actions, art, and prayer. Young people today live in a participatory culture, where they create cultural content as well as consume it. Treating youth primarily as consumers of worship, programming, and mission fails to recognize their creativity and makes church seem unwelcoming and archaic.

- **A culture of theological awareness.** Youth ministry ought to help youth see their lives the way God sees them — which means becoming aware of theological categories like grace, forgiveness, redemption, sin, and hope. Because so few churches do this well, kids growing up in churches today frame their lives in pretty much the same way as anybody else, which makes it tough to buck cultural norms that run contrary to the Gospel. Healthy youth ministry teaches young people to imagine themselves as participants in God’s story.

- **Experiences, skills, and supportive environments** for young people to reflect on religious traditions, practices, and beliefs where they can wrestle with, try on, and eventually become shaped by the tradition. They need opportunities to reflect on who they are and what they are called to, discover their inner passions, to see the things God has placed inside them, and to use what God has given them for God’s glory. They also need to see how their callings can help transform the world as they critically reflect on the world’s conditions and take action.