



The NEXUS Institute: Intentional Theological Education for Youth Leadership Formation

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A college student came to my (Russell Lackey's) study seeking help on a speech. His assignment was to share his personal religious beliefs. He did not know where to begin. In order to assist him, I asked a series of questions designed to help him draw out his faith.¹ One of these questions asked about his faith journey. This question opened him up. He said that he had been raised a Roman Catholic but in high

¹ Many of the questions I asked the student came from Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The future of the church is in its young people, and engaging them in the faith and in lives filled with God is crucial. One program that seeks to draw youth into a deeper relationship with God is the NEXUS Institute at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, which draws on Lutheran theological resources for summer programs with youth.

school he had walked away from the faith. I followed up and asked why he left. He said that his mother wanted him to get confirmed but he did not want to do the homework. Because of this, he had to meet with the priest. Counter to his expectation that the priest would challenge him on matters of faith, the priest let him get confirmed without doing any work. The student said, "I decided to get confirmed to appease my mom. I still didn't fill out the booklets. Yet, they still confirmed me. This shows the hypocrisy in all of this. Religion is simply recruiting and nothing else." Unfortunately, this student ran into a faith of convenience instead of a faith large enough to capture his imagination. This is not an isolated case.

There are still young adults who are being formed with a consequential faith. In his research, Smith found young adults whose faith played an instrumental role in their lives. A common thread among these teenagers were religious and spiritual practices that formed their faith.

Christian Smith and his team of researchers at the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) suggest that the major beliefs of young adults should be identified as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD, Smith explains, posits that the "central goal of life for emerging adults is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."² The main vision of life for those with MTD is the middle-class desire to "get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease."³ Though Smith does not present the historical and philosophical traditions that would make MTD plausible for young people in our culture, he does list dangerous side effects of MTD which can plague emerging adults. These include feeling morally adrift, lostness in mindless consumerism, addiction to drugs and

² Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–163.

³ Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, and Hilary Davidson, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 236–237.

alcohol, risky sexual encounters, and civil and political disengagement. This description is a concerning one.

Thankfully, not all is lost. There are still young adults who are being formed with a consequential faith. In his research, Smith found young adults whose faith played an instrumental role in their lives. A common thread among these teenagers were religious and spiritual practices that formed their faith. Smith writes:

For such teens, faith involves their intentionally engaging in regularly enacted religious habits and works that have theological, spiritual, or moral meaning that form their lives, such as habitual worshiping with other believers, reading scriptures, praying regularly, practicing confession and forgiveness, reconciliation, engaging in service to others, using and not using one's body in particular ways, tuning into religious music and other religious art forms, and engaging in regular faith education and formation.⁴

Echoing Smith's observations, Kenda Creasy Dean notes: "In Christian tradition, a creed, community, call, and hope are tools God uses to enter the world, and to enter us."⁵ When God breaks into lives, a missional impulse is created which rules out MTD because "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."⁶

THE LUTHERAN PRECEDENT

Martin Luther is helpful on this point. Luther wrote the *Small Catechism* because of the "deplorable, wretched deprivation" he experienced as part of his participation of the Saxon visitations of the late 1520s.⁷ He believed that if the "church is to flourish again, one must

⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 27.

⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers in Telling the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60.

⁶ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 64.

⁷ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 347:1.

begin by instructing the young.”⁸ Luther’s strategy was to mobilize parents to instruct their children by having them memorize the catechism. Luther would not have been surprised by the NSYR’s findings that “parent religiosity during the teenage years was one of the strongest predictors of young people’s faith in emerging adulthood.”⁹ Luther’s insistence on intentional formation is stressed in his *Large Catechism*:

We Christians ought to make every day such a holy day and devote ourselves only to holy things, that is, to occupy ourselves daily with God’s Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips. However, as we have said, because we all do not have the time and leisure, we must set aside several hours a week for the young people, or at least a day for the whole community, when we can concentrate only on these matters and deal especially with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, and thus regulate our entire life and being in accordance with God’s Word.¹⁰

For Luther, God’s Word has power to change the heart and thus create passion. Luther explains:

. . . you must constantly keep God’s Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. . . . On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living.¹¹

Of course, catechization is more than simply presenting information. Instead, it is about the catechumens receiving a word that embodies the entire life of a person in society, church, and home.

⁸ Martin Albrecht, “Effects of Luther’s Catechism on the Church of the Sixteenth Century,” Paper presented at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1979: <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/144>

⁹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 111–112.

¹⁰ *BC*, 398:89.

¹¹ *BC*, 400:100.

What is crucial for Dean, Luther, and Smith is the importance of both the church and the home for creating and sustaining practices which grow from faith and lead to love. Unfortunately, churches have forgotten this message and the home has abandoned teaching the faith.

NEXUS: AN INITIATIVE TO ENGAGE YOUTH THEOLOGICALLY

The Campus Ministry and the Theology Department of Grand View University, a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), sought to address the need to address teaching youth the basics of Christian faith and how it bears on life by developing NEXUS, a high school youth theology institute, originally supported through an initiative of the Lilly Endowment. Since 1998, nearly 20,000 students have participated in such Lilly-sponsored programs. Of this group, 5,000 students were interviewed to determine the successfulness of these initiatives. Overall, these programs have yielded remarkable results:

- Half of the participants attended church-related or Christian colleges.
- One quarter of them majored in religion or theology in college.
- Half said that they participated in a vocational discernment program in college.
- Four out of five engaged in some kind of volunteer work in college.
- One quarter said that they have graduated from, are currently enrolled in, or plan to attend seminary.
- Almost half (40 percent) said that in ten years they expect to be in ministry or some form of work that serves others in need.¹²

The NEXUS Institute, short for NEXUS Community of Young Christian Leaders Program, was established to create a pipeline for shaping a new generation of church leaders. Prior generations of North

¹² “Summary Reports of Lilly Endowment Grants Programs.” Theological Education 42, no 1, (2006), <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/2006-theological-education-v42-n1.pdf>.

American Lutherans could count on a collaboration between congregations, summer camps, and church-related colleges to establish a pipeline for pastoral candidates. This pipeline has been in decline for many decades.

NEXUS provides all costs for participants other than a small registration fee. It is explicitly Lutheran in its approach and through that lens seeks to inspire, energize, and equip youth for ministry, not only as a possible future vocation but also currently in their own congregations.

NEXUS is less interested in rehabbing this former ethos and instead seeks to establish intentional Christian community for high school youth by means of a week-long encounter with Christian theology, intentional community, and vocational exploration. NEXUS provides all costs for participants other than a small registration fee. It is explicitly Lutheran in its approach and through that lens seeks to inspire, energize, and equip youth for ministry, not only as a possible future vocation but also currently in their own congregations. It models a trinitarian, incarnational theology, fosters theological learning and personal faith, a deeper understanding of vocation, and equips students to be practitioners of incarnational ministry. It seeks to reach three explicit goals:

Goal 1. Theology and Faith Formation: NEXUS participants will increase their knowledge of biblical content and themes, along with Lutheran faith traditions, through participation with other youth in Bible study; learning Lutheran theology, history, and traditions; engaging together in worship and fellowship.

Goal 2. Understanding and Living Vocation: informed by the work of recent years to embed the exploration of vocation as a key element of Grand View's core curriculum, the University has in place the faculty, staff, and educational resources to provide high school students with information

and support that will foster their continuing work to identify and live out their personal vocations. In addition to getting to know pastors, academic theologians, campus ministry professionals, and university students active in campus ministry, NEXUS participants will engage with speakers and mentors who are outstanding exemplars of Christian service, ministry, and lived vocations.

Goal 3. Creating and Sustaining a Community of Faith for High School Age Individuals: youth engagement and understanding of leadership in the church can be stimulated by providing a community which fosters exploration of vocation; community involvement and service; Bible and theology study and fellowship in the company of peers, Grand View student mentors, and campus ministry staff. With a week of dynamic experiences, NEXUS will foster participants' bridging of the gap in youth ministry between their early years of Christian education in their congregations and reaching their college years and the ministry programs offered there. Following the week of NEXUS, there is continued, intentional community-building and conversation through social media and video conferencing among participants and Grand View faculty, students, ministry staff, and congregational youth leaders.

These three goals offer a full agenda for the NEXUS week. All goals are assessed by means of a pretest and posttest which over the years has confirmed the success of NEXUS in reaching these goals.

NEXUS invites about twenty to twenty-five student participants. Participants have come from up to twenty-one different states. Sometimes Iowa, where Grand View University is located, is well represented but other times participants from Iowa are in the minority. A few congregations send youth every year. Eight college-age mentors assist the students. Many years see students return.

The majority of NEXUS participants have never considered ministry as an option. No one has ever proposed ministry as a vocation for them to consider. Likewise, they have never realized that their pastors or youth workers were once teens. NEXUS exposes students to the journeys of those who have entered ministry, the motives that

led them to enter ministry, and what has sustained them in ministry. NEXUS “Late Night,” patterned after Late Night with Jimmy Fallon, allows students to hear various Christian leaders interviewed: parish pastors, theologians, missionaries, teachers, or workers in Christian agencies. Pastors who are interviewed include those serving in rural, small town, urban, and suburban settings, the types of ministry settings varying from year to year. Students learn that peoples’ call stories specify many factors which led them to enter ministry and that these factors are different for everyone.

While Grand View University is an ELCA-related institution, NEXUS from day one has reached out not only to the ELCA but also Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and the North American Lutheran Church. Indeed, the latter group, concerned about the lack of the younger generation expressing an interest in parish ministry and facing a deficit of parish pastors, like most Christian groups today, has financially supported NEXUS and also has upheld it in prayer and publicity. Differences between the three Lutheran groups are acknowledged and respectfully articulated to the college mentors during their training. If requested, students are presented how and why different Lutheran groups disagree on various issues and are allowed to sort through these differences. In our experience, such differences have made no negative impact on participants, and, in fact, in many cases, have stimulated students to think through their own positions on the differences between the groups.

NEXUS always has a theme. For instance, the theme of 2022 was “Jesus Makes Us One.” Fixtures in NEXUS includes a session on Old Testament and another on New Testament. In addition to these two classes, students receive educational opportunities to explore the beliefs of various Christian denominations, the nature of Lutheran worship and the church year, the value of apologetics in the face of contemporary secularism, various forms of prayer and meditation, and giving voice to one’s own faith journey. A central feature of NEXUS is morning and evening worship. Morning worship is a traditional Matins service while evening worship tends to be contemporary, led by a small band. Holy Communion is celebrated at each evening worship. Worship is held at Luther Memorial Church, a traditional sanctuary with features unique to its Danish-American heritage.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

One of the best ways to get a feel for the value of the theological training which youth experience in NEXUS is to share quotes from participants describing how they interacted with their peers, their mentors, their faith development, and also perceptions of mentors, who are college-age, and so also in a faith-formative time of their lives.

With respect to connecting with their peers, NEXUS participants wrote:

“The thing I loved most about NEXUS is the people, all fun to be around and everyone welcomes you. I got to discuss theological and life questions with other people my age.”

“The small groups and afternoon adventures were meaningful because we were able to bond with the other attendees while also having a lot of fun!”

“I grew so much in my faith and met so many new people that will forever be family!”

In response to the bonding which mentors fostered with participants, NEXUS students have noted:

“The mentors made me feel like I belonged the moment I stepped on campus.”

“I made so many friends that turned into a hodgepodge family that I love! The mentors were amazing at communicating and connecting with mentees.”

“The mentor-led small groups were very powerful and connected me with a support system.”

Like NEXUS participants, mentors have had little-to-no theological education. Their perceptions about NEXUS confirm those of the participants:

“As mentors we cared for each other, showed grace to each other, and truly served God at NEXUS. The worship times throughout the week were awesome and so were all the

professors and pastors that attended NEXUS. They were strong role models of what it looks like to serve in ministry.”

“I was able to practice and learn skills that will someday help me when I am doing full-time ministry because I was a college-age mentor at NEXUS. Such skills were helping lead a small group, writing/giving a devotion, talking about the Bible with other people, etc.”

“Being a NEXUS mentor turned my world upside down. I discerned the call to become a pastor and switched my major that fall. I’m now in seminary and serving as a youth director.”

NEXUS wants participants to grow in their knowledge of the Bible, the Lutheran theological heritage, and encourage students to think theologically. The vast majority of those who have participated confirm that they have grown due to their participation in this initiative:

“I really enjoyed theology classes. They allowed me to engage my faith. It opened my eyes to studying theology in college.”

“I loved discussing theological and life questions with others my age and with knowledgeable people like pastors and theology professors.”

“Our professors ate meals with us so we could ask more questions. I also got their emails so I can stay in touch!”

“I learned that God is loving, not angry. He is so passionate about us that he puts rules in place so we stay well.”¹³

CULTURAL CHALLENGES AND CHURCHLY OPPORTUNITIES

No doubt, the structure of an intensive program in theology for high school youth led by college professors and staff does not match

¹³ These quotes are gleaned from participant feedback from various years.

the resources that most congregations have. Nevertheless, insights gained from hands-on work mentoring youth in a week-long youth institute can be shared with congregational leaders. These leaders then can finetune these insights for their particular contexts. Briefly, NEXUS has taught us that solid grounding in the Bible, participating in both traditional and contemporary worship, receiving instruction in classical and contemporary approaches to private and group devotion, and training in peer ministry are crucial for developing youth leadership in the church. At its core, youth programs flourish when mentoring in Christian discipleship is taken seriously and a haven is offered youth which allows them to authentically bond with their peers. The latter especially helps youth drop their guard and become united with their peers and mentors.

If a message is sent to young people that commitment to church is optional, then we should not be surprised to see a significant number of youth drop out of congregational life.

Some congregations are unable to provide the staffing that youth work requires, and no doubt others are indifferent. Many parents do not prioritize youth involvement in church and instead push their children into sports, music, and drama opportunities with the hope that such engagement will yield college scholarships. Likewise, when marriages collapse, commitment to a congregation's life is often sacrificed. It is not clear that mainline Protestants have done a good job at providing reasons for why youth should remain committed to congregation after confirmation. If a message is sent to young people that commitment to church is optional, then we should not be surprised to see a significant number of youth drop out of congregational life. An earlier generation could foster hopes that those who become inactive after confirmation would find their way back to church after they had their first child. But with the ethos of Therapeutic Moralistic Deism defining the values of a rising population of young people, coupled with the complete loss of social pressure for families or singles to be active in church, this hope has now been lost. At the forefront of youth

ministry is the conviction that the question of “why be in church” must be addressed.

All these concerns are translatable into opportunities. The anticipation of a college scholarship from participation in sports should not be pitted against participation in a congregation’s life. Nor should we assume that college graduation automatically guarantees a rewarding life. Those who do attend college cannot escape basic human needs such as community and acceptance. It is a rare youth who does not encounter a social network composed of competition whether for grades, performance in extracurricular activities, social cliques, or the invasive and unforgiving space of social media. At its best, the Christian faith secures youth in God’s unconditional grace, in a world in which everything else comes at a cost, and provides them both security in supportive community but also adventure as a sense of purpose and agency is set before them. Those youth who become more engaged with their faith due to content-focused activities in their youth group, like in-depth Bible study or reflection on how faith grapples with real life, are apt to be more resilient in their Lutheran commitments when they encounter proselytizing Evangelicals in college or the workforce. Likely they would be less apt to adopt a secularistic frame of reference if that is the only educational opportunity available to them. Instead, they are apt to interpret their various experiences through the many-splendored lens of the Christian faith.

CONCLUSION

To return to the story at the beginning of this article, no doubt the priest felt he was helping an adolescent and his mother by dismissing the work expected for confirmation. But we have found that the most important faith matter for young people is to present the faith in a way that captures their imaginations, that is, engage them with biblical narratives and Lutheran distinctives within a community of worship, prayer, and vocational exploration. These practices not only encourage youth to bond with one another but also push them to interpret their lives in light of God’s purpose for them. Fun activities are a crucial component in youth work, but youth must also be offered a vision of our life in Christ which commends their allegiance. As this happens, youth are empowered to embrace leadership roles in their

current congregations, and many entertain the possibilities of ministry, in some way or another, for their vocation.

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