

RELATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP IN MINISTRY WITH YOUTH: MAPPING THE PAST, CONFRONTING THE GAPS, SHAPING THE FUTURE

TENx10 WHITE PAPER

SEPTEMBER 2025

This white paper offers a comprehensive assessment of the current landscape of youth discipleship, with a particular focus on the practice and promise of relational ministry. Drawing from an interdisciplinary network of scholars and practitioners, it synthesizes empirical research, theological reflection, and contextual analysis to examine how trust-based relationships serve as the primary context for faith formation in an era marked by institutional disaffiliation and cultural fragmentation.

The paper identifies enduring strengths and emerging gaps in both the literature and practice of youth ministry, including the underrepresentation of marginalized voices. Rather than prescribing uniform solutions, this report serves as a framework for discerning how relational approaches to discipleship can be adapted, evaluated, and scaled across diverse ministry ecosystems.

Prepared by

FUTURE OF FAITH ■■■■

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Relational Discipleship in Ministry with Youth: Mapping the Past, Confronting the Gaps, Shaping the Future

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A white paper commissioned by the TENx10 Collaboration and prepared by Future of Faith with TENx10 Research Advisory Board¹²

Executive Summary

This white paper surveys the past and present of youth ministry scholarship to identify where the field is headed and what it will take to get there. Our analysis shows a clear convergence around a relational paradigm: the conviction that lasting faith grows not from isolated programs, but from sustained networks of interwoven relationships. We explore relational discipleship as a longstanding expression of shared formation and communal faithfulness, emerging across cultures and generations. We consider the wisdom it holds and the challenges that remain if the church is to more fully embrace this way of being across its diversity.

Drawing on historical case studies, theological reflection, and empirical research, we interrogate cycles of creativity and institutionalization, map pivotal studies across traditions, and use negative-case analysis to learn from models and voices often left out of the dominant narrative. We argue that relational discipleship, understood as ecosystems of mutual presence, shared story, and communal practice, offers the most generative framework for integrating past achievements with emerging needs.

Our findings are organized in four parts:

- **Part 1** situates relational ministry within the larger history of North American youth ministry, highlighting the enduring “diversity gap” in representation, methodology, and structure despite the central role these communities have played in forming and developing relational youth ministry approaches.
- **Part 2** synthesizes five recurring pillars of effective relational faith formation—significant adults, spiritual practices, service, family engagement, and whole-church integration—and demonstrates how these elements interact to foster resilient, contextualized faith.
- **Part 3** examines two sets of counterpoints: models of ministry that succeed without centering one-to-one mentorship, and voices and practices routinely marginalized in the literature, including those of Black, Latino/a, Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI), Indigenous, rural, disabled, LGBTQ+, and immigrant communities.

1 The Future of Faith research team consists of Dr. Josh Packard (lead author), Megan Bissell, and Brandon Wong. The TENx10 Research Advisory Board consists of Ebonie Davis, Dr. Sarah Farmer, Dr. Tracey Lamont (ad hoc), Dr. Jake Mulder, Dr. Dave Rahn, and Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Tamez Méndez. Learn more about TENx10 at www.tenx10.org.

2 Suggested Citation: Josh Packard, Megan Bissell, and Brandon Wong, *Relational Discipleship in Ministry with Youth: Mapping the Past, Confronting the Gaps, Shaping the Future*. (Greeley, CO: Future of Faith, 2025).

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- **Part 4** advances a research and practice agenda, calling for new evaluative frameworks, cross-sector partnerships, co-creative methodologies, and an embedded diversity lens that treats cultural particularity as essential to the definition of relational discipleship.

We do not propose a single model for all contexts. Instead, we provide a map of the current landscape, questions that demand further exploration, and examples that illustrate both the promise and the limits of relational ministry as it is currently practiced. We endeavor with this white paper to expand the field's imagination and equip leaders to build relational ecosystems that are as diverse and dynamic as the young people they serve.

Part 1: Roots and Reckonings

1.1 Introduction

Questions We Started With:

- Why is “relational discipleship” such a persistent aspiration yet so elusive as a clear, actionable practice?
- How are generational, technological, and cultural shifts altering the nature of faith formation?
- What kind of shared language and practical focus can unify the field and invite broad engagement going forward?

Purpose of the White Paper

There is growing consensus across academic, denominational, and practitioner circles that the most significant way to make faith matter in the lives of young people is to prioritize relational discipleship.³ Although this conviction is not new, as ministry leaders from multiple eras and traditions have affirmed the centrality of relationships, the world in which we embody this conviction has changed dramatically.⁴ As a result, the church’s usual methods, default structures, and traditional authority have become less compelling and less effective, especially among emerging generations.⁵

This white paper’s purpose is not to offer the final word, but to serve as a scaffolding, mapping a landscape that has been reshaped by digital transformation, shifting authority, global migration, diversity of identity and belief, and deep suspicion toward inherited institutions.⁶ It stakes the claim that “relational” cannot remain an abstraction; it must become concrete, collaboratively defined, and operationalized for every day, scalable ministry.

3 David Veerman, “How Can Leaders Build a Relational Youth Ministry?” in *Reaching a Generation for Christ: A Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry*, ed. Richard Dunn and Mark H. Senter, III (Moody Publishers, 1997), 217–238; Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Upper Room Books, 1998); Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (InterVarsity Press, 2007); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Baker Academic, 2011); Elizabeth Tamez Méndez, “Rethinking Latino Youth Ministry: Frameworks That Provide Roots and Wings for Our Youth,” *Apuntes: Theological Reflections from the Hispanic-Latino Context* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 42–91; John C. Cavadini, Nicholas M. Healy, and John W. O’Malley, *The Renewal of Catholic Youth Ministry: Pastoral, Theological, and Historical Foundations* (Liturgical Press, 2019).

4 Ebonie Davis, “Engaging Youth Discipleship through a Relational Discovery Paradigm,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 21, no. 1 (2023): 20–62.

5 Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (Rutgers University Press, 2010).

6 Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Abigail B. Blake, Claire McAllister, Hannah Lemon, and A. LeRoy, “Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness,” *Journal of Adolescence* 93 (2021): 257–269.

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Youth ministry can no longer count on inherited trust, a socially-reinforced pipeline, or the persuasive power of charismatic leaders alone.⁷ Research across Catholic, Protestant, independent, and global fields consistently shows that durable faith arises through “webs of significant relationships,” intergenerational, peer, family, and mentor, sustained over time and marked by mutuality, empathy, and belonging.⁸

This project draws from a wide range of resources: academic histories and theological reflection, qualitative and quantitative empirical research, sociological and anthropological analysis, practitioner perspectives, Catholic and Protestant denominational guidelines, cross-cultural and global ministry findings, and essays and interviews commissioned from experts specifically for this project, primarily to cover aspects of diversity that have not been widely researched or published. Each section is intentionally bracketed by “questions we started with” and “questions we still have or new questions,” cultivating future work over closure.

Questions We Still Have:

- How do we avoid centering a “relational turn” only on dominant cultural or denominational perspectives?
- In what ways might participatory and collaborative frameworks bring young people, families, and marginalized voices into shaping the next phase of the field?
- What iterative processes of reflection, research, and convening will keep the conversation open and adaptive?

1.2 History and Evolution

Questions We Started With:

- How did North American youth ministry develop, and what can we learn from its cycles of creativity, critique, and reinvention?
- What cultural, institutional, and technological ruptures and continuities set the contours for ministry today?
- What, if anything, constitutes a truly operational and inclusive “relational turn” in a post-Christendom, pluralistic, digitalized world?

Tracing the History, Evolution, and Emerging Future of Youth Ministry

North American youth ministry has never had a single point of origin. While white Protestant institutions developed early models such as Sunday Schools and the YMCA in response to industrialization and urbanization, equally enduring streams of youth discipleship were thriving in Black churches, Indigenous communities, and immigrant congregations.⁹ These traditions, rooted in testimony, storytelling, intergenerational care, and communal resilience, offered some of the deepest and most consistent examples of relational formation, even though they were rarely recognized as such in academic literature.

⁷ Josh Packard, *Faithful Futures: Sacred Tools for Engaging Emerging Generations* (Baker Publishing Group, 2025).

⁸ Alethea Desrosiers, Brien S. Kelley, and Lisa Miller, “Parent and Peer Relationships and Relational Spirituality in Adolescents and Young Adults,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 3(1) (2021): 39–54.

⁹ Jon Pahl, *Youth Ministry in Modern America: 1930 to the Present* (Hendrickson, 2000); Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Baker Publishing Group, 2010).

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Alongside dominant Protestant narratives that emphasized institutional alignment, youth ministry developed uniquely within minority communities. Black churches cultivated ministries deeply tied to Afrocentric traditions and rites of passage, emphasizing communal identity and cultural affirmation.¹⁰ Similarly, the emergence of Latino/a youth ministries reflected themes of cultural preservation and social activism, highlighting community solidarity and prophetic witness within immigrant and diaspora contexts.¹¹

In AAPI communities, youth ministry was shaped significantly by tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation.¹² Ministries navigated dual identities, seeking ways to honor traditional heritage while fostering integration into broader society.¹³ These ministries often developed independent youth churches, which served as transitional spaces nurturing cultural identity alongside spiritual formation.¹⁴

In Indigenous communities, youth ministry often unfolds within complex cultural and religious dynamics shaped by historical trauma, colonial missions, and intergenerational resilience. Approximately 18 percent of Indigenous people self-identify as Catholic, yet young Indigenous people frequently report experiences of alienation from both their cultural heritage and the institutional church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)'s 2024 pastoral framework for Indigenous ministry notes that young Indigenous people face elevated rates of suicide, unemployment, and substance abuse, and often struggle to reconcile ancestral traditions with Christian formation.¹⁵ Programs such as the St. Francis Xavier Mission in South Dakota's Rosebud Reservation offer promising models of culturally grounded ministry, centering Indigenous identity and spiritual practice as integral to discipleship.¹⁶ Other initiatives, such as the *Wholemakers* curriculum, developed with leaders like Teresa Rojo Tsosie, equip young Indigenous Catholic people to engage in climate justice through a lens that honors Indigenous ecological wisdom and Catholic spirituality.¹⁷

10 Richelle White, *Keeping It Real: Relational, Real, and Relevant Ministry with Black Youth* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

11 Fernando Arzola Jr., *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context* (InterVarsity Press, 2008); José W. Pimentel, *Engaging with New Generations: Integrating English-Speaking Hispanics in a Spanish-Speaking Congregation* (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021).

12 Pamela A. Kurien, *Ethnic Church Meets Megachurch: Indian American Christianity in Motion* (New York University Press, 2017).

13 Sharon Kim and Rhonda Y. Kim, "Second-Generation Korean American Christians' Communities: Congregational Hybridity," in *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation*, ed. Carolyn Chen and Russell Jeung, 176–194 (New York University Press, 2012); Christine J. Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church* (Springer, 2015); Christine J. Hong, *The History of AAPI Youth Ministry and Shared Themes across Different AAPI Communities* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

14 Jonathan Hyung Lee, *Youth Ministry Curriculum Developing Korean American Youth's Christ-Centered Identity* [doctoral project, George Fox University, 2023].

15 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise: A Pastoral Framework for Indigenous Ministry* (June 2024): 22–24.

16 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Realities Facing Youth and Young Adults in the United States* (2020).

17 Kelly Sankowski, "This Native Catholic Is Teaching Youth about Climate Change," *U.S. Catholic*, October 26, 2023; see also: Catholic Climate Covenant, "Wholemakers: A Program for Youth and Young Adults," <https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/programs/youth-and-young-adults/wholemakers/>.

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In Black Catholic communities, Ansel Augustine highlights ongoing struggles against systemic racism within church structures, illustrating how even relational models continue to be sometimes undermined by broader societal inequities.¹⁸ Youth ministry in these contexts have consistently called for justice-oriented relational practices rooted in solidarity and systemic advocacy.¹⁹

Taken together, these Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, and AAPI traditions reflect deeply relational ecosystems built not around programs but around people, place, and purpose. While often excluded from mainstream literature, they constitute not the margins of youth ministry history, but its most persistent and adaptive forms. These ministries were rarely given institutional resourcing or academic validation, yet they forged resilient practices of discipleship amid systemic neglect and cultural upheaval. Their witness continues to shape the possibilities of youth ministry today, even as dominant models struggle to adapt.

Alongside these developments in relational approaches, it is important to recognize that majority culture Protestant traditions contributed meaningfully to the visibility, legitimacy, and theological framing of youth ministry as a field. Evangelical and mainline leaders helped embed youth ministry in congregational life, popularized relational and incarnational models of formation, and built the infrastructure, which included training programs, curricula, and leadership pipelines that gave youth ministry institutional staying power.

These developments also helped validate youth ministry as a distinct calling and profession. For many practitioners, the developments opened pathways to recognition, theological education, denominational support, and sustainable roles within church systems. The professionalization of youth ministry, though not without its challenges, brought much-needed attention to the spiritual lives of young people and unlocked resources from individuals, denominations, congregations, and funding agencies that made long-term engagement possible in settings that had previously overlooked this work.

The mid-twentieth century brought significant innovation to this area of the field with the rise of parachurch ministries like Young Life, Youth for Christ, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which prioritized relationally driven models featuring adult mentors and peer communities over formal religious education programs.²⁰ These approaches emphasized incarnational ministry, engaging young people within their own cultural and social environments rather than expecting them to assimilate into adult-driven structures.²¹

18 Ansel Augustine, *Recreating Our Sacred Safe Spaces: The Reality of Youth Ministry in the Black/African American Catholic Community* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

19 Arthur David Canales, "Transforming Teenagers: Integrating Social Justice into Catholic Youth Ministry or Catholic Education," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice* 4, no. 1 (2010).

20 Michael Severe and Mark H. Senter III, "Forty Years of Youth Ministry," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2020): 1–19.

21 Kimberly Nollan, *The History and Development of Relational Youth Ministry as a Practice* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

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Mark Oestreicher traces how many of these mid-century innovations eventually gave rise to an ecosystem of youth ministry training organizations and university or seminary programs.²² As denominational structures loosened and congregational leadership grew more distributed, these organizations stepped in to professionalize and equip youth workers, offering curricula, coaching, and frameworks aimed at translating relational theory into sustainable practice.

Many of these organizations, however, worked in an almost universally dominant cultural paradigm. For example, Mark Senter's widely used classroom texts in the 1980s and 1990s helped codify relational ministry as a professional field, framing it through axioms that emphasized adult entry into adolescent worlds and relational influence as the key to spiritual maturity.²³ While incredibly helpful and influential in Christian education settings, these frameworks largely reflected white evangelical assumptions and circulated within institutions accessible to those with theological training. The problem is not with the work itself, but rather that, over time, such models were often treated as normative, while contributions from Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, AAPI, and other marginalized communities were framed as "contextual," a distinction that has constrained the field's theological imagination.

Oestreicher also critiques how some training paradigms began to mirror the very institutional logic they hoped to disrupt, reinforcing standardized models that were insufficiently adaptive to cultural and contextual diversity. His analysis invites today's leaders to recover a more agile and reflective approach to training that elevates relational instincts, cultural humility, and spiritual attentiveness as primary competencies. Kimberly Nollan's analysis traces this shift historically and makes the case that incarnational and relational youth ministries must intentionally adapt to local contexts, embedding flexibility, justice, and cultural wisdom into their very structure, not just their operations.²⁴

As these ministries expanded, cycles emerged of institutionalization, bureaucratic consolidation, and reliance on charismatic individuals rather than sustainable relational ecosystems.²⁵ Catholic youth ministry experienced analogous tensions, balancing periods of pedagogical renewal, lay formation, and community engagement with moments of institutional retrenchment and adult-driven program delivery.²⁶ The recent exhortations by Pope Francis have done much to return focus to youth and young adult ministry across the Catholic Church.²⁷

22 Mark Oestreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0: A Manifesto of Where We've Been, Where We Are and Where We Need to Go* (Zondervan, 2008); Mark Oestreicher, *History of Youth Ministry Training Organizations* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

23 Mark H. Senter III, ed., *The Complete Book of Youth Ministry* (Moody Press, 1987); Richard R. Dunn and Mark H. Senter III, *Reaching a Generation for Christ: A Comprehensive Guide to Youth Ministry* (Moody Press, 1997).

24 Nollan, *The History and Development of Relational Youth Ministry as a Practice*.

25 Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*; Ruth Lukabyo, "The History of Protestant Youth Ministry; a Review," *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20, no. 2 (2021): 214–233, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-02002001>.

26 Cavadini, Healy, and O'Malley, *The Renewal of Catholic Youth Ministry*; Charlotte McCorquodale, "New Directions in Youth and Young Adult Ministry Leadership: Where Have We Been and More Importantly Where Are We Headed?" *Religions*, 12, no. 3 (2021): 146; Augustine, *Recreating Our Sacred Safe Spaces*.

27 Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God*. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019).

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Both Protestant and Catholic traditions saw remarkable energy in the mid- to late-twentieth century, but by the 1990s and 2000s, research and practice revealed diminishing fruit: lower long-term faith retention, declining engagement among young people, and growing unease about programmatic fixations. Critiques ranged from separating young people from the broader congregation to the “theological thinness” and consumerism of event-driven approaches.²⁸

What This History Teaches

1. **Relational aspiration is recurring.** Each wave “rediscovers” presence, accompaniment, and intergenerational life.
2. **Systems shape sustainability.** Without structures that distribute care and leadership, relational energy burns hot and fades. Specialization has tended to isolate youth ministry from the rest of congregational life, often at odds with models in nonwhite communities. As youth ministry became more professionalized and programmatic, it left larger ecclesial systems untouched.
3. **Context matters.** Communities outside dominant frames have long practiced robust relational models tied to culture, justice, and communal identity; the field has too seldom centered their wisdom.
4. **Programmatic success ≠ durable formation.** Catalytic events and curricula can help, but they do not replace the daily ecology of relationships where faith is actually learned, tested, and owned.

Beyond the Diversity Gap: Recovering Suppressed Traditions of Relational Discipleship

Throughout this history of development within youth ministry, a persistent critique within both scholarship and practice is that even as the church and society have become vastly more diverse, dominant youth ministry models, research agendas, and underlying assumptions have not sufficiently adapted.²⁹ Much of the literature and leadership shaping youth ministry in the twentieth century emerged from white, suburban, middle-class contexts. As a result, many of the deepest traditions of relational discipleship were systemically sidelined, treated as “alternative” rather than essential. What has often been framed as a “diversity gap” is, in reality, a legacy of institutional gatekeeping.

Consequently, practitioners across the field miss the opportunity to learn from the experiences and practices of those with a long and developed history of relational ministry, such as young Black, Latino/a, AAPI, Indigenous, rural, refugee, disabled, LGBTQ+, and immigrant people.³⁰ This significant “diversity gap” between the prevalent frameworks proposed by mainstream

28 Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*. (InterVarsity Press, 2006); Andrew Root, *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteers, and Parents on Relational Ministry* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009); Dean, *Almost Christian*.

29 Mary R. Glenn, Tyler S. Greenway, Kara E. Powell, Jennifer A. Guerra Aldana, and Brad M. Griffin, “We Are Family: What Multicultural Youth Ministry Research Reveals about Leadership Dynamics, Multi-Diversity, and Immigrant Narratives,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 17, no. 2 (2019): 58–77; Mark Senter, *Emerging Youth Ministry* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025].

30 Augustine, *Recreating Our Sacred Safe Spaces*; Hong, *The History of AAPI Youth Ministry*; Erin Raffety, *Ministry with Disabled Youth: A Scholarly Literature Review* [unpublished commissioned essay, 2025]; White, *Keeping It Real*.

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research and the complex, lived experiences of diverse young populations hinders the ability of the field to move forward.³¹

By “diversity gap,” we mean three interrelated dimensions: representational, methodological, and structural. “Representational” refers to who is included in samples and who is writing, teaching, funding, and publishing. “Methodological” concerns which questions are asked, in what languages, and by whom, as well as what counts as data (for example, testimony, ritual, art, or communal memory) and what is omitted. “Structural” addresses which ecclesial and educational systems have the resources to experiment and measure, and which do not. In the Catholic Church, for example, most dioceses have a leadership office for youth ministry, but less than half have offices for Hispanic/Latino/a ministry. Fewer have an office dedicated to *Pastoral Juvenil*—ministry with Hispanic/Latino/a children and young adults.³² This gap produces distortions: models that work in one context are presented as universally valid; practices long embedded in marginalized communities are overlooked, delayed, or rediscovered and rebranded elsewhere.

The current situation calls urgently for contextually grounded, relational, and culturally responsive models of youth ministry that resist uniform approaches and instead prioritize listening deeply to and empowering young people within their specific cultural and social realities.

The failure of earlier models to address cultural specificity has left many modern ministries struggling to build trust and belonging with marginalized young people, as diversity is a top expressed value of emerging generations.³³ These patterns, rather than being confined to history, continue to shape the limits and possibilities of ministry today.

Developmental psychology continues to affirm that identity work and spirituality develop together. Research on ethnic identity finds that as adolescents negotiate belonging, language, and heritage, spiritual salience and obligations to community often shift in tandem—strengthening the case for bilingual, bicultural, and family-embedded practices in ministries.³⁴

Ultimately, the future of youth ministry belongs to approaches that fully embrace relationality at every level and remain contextually adaptive, transforming diversity from a perceived challenge into an essential asset for robust and inclusive discipleship.

31 Severe and Senter, “Forty Years of Youth Ministry.”

32 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Diocesan Survey on Parishes and Hispanic/Latino Ministry, 2024*. (USCCB Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, 2024). <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Diocesan%20Survey%20on%20Parishes%20and%20HispanicLatino%20Ministry%202024.pdf>.

33 Josh Packard, with Ellen B. Koneck, Jerry Ruff, Megan Bissell, and Jana N. Abdulkadir, *Meaning Making: 8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations*, foreword by Rabbi Elan Babchuk (Springtide Research Institute, 2020).

34 Linda P. Juang and Moin Syed, “Ethnic Identity and Spirituality: From Theory to Research,” in *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality: From Theory to Research*, ed. Richard M. Lerner, Robert W. Roeser, and Erin Phelps, 262–284 (Templeton Press, 2008).

Declining Institutional Trust, Digital Overload, and Identity Shifts: The Imperative for Relational Discipleship

The current youth ministry environment is shaped by seismic cultural changes, each of which directly challenges traditional models and underscores the necessity of deeply relational discipleship as the only effective path forward.

- **Erosion of institutional trust:** Youth and young adults are less likely than ever to affiliate with religious bodies or trust religious leadership by default.³⁵ Drawing on recent findings, Packard articulates the core challenge of this moment: Traditional methods were built for a “high-trust world,” but “levels of trust in organizations, leaders, and one another are at or near all-time lows. The same tools that worked in the high-trust world are not likely to be very effective now.”³⁶ Despite this, trust in relationships remains high. For many communities that have encountered systemic violence at the hands of institutions, this has been the dynamic for generations. For others, this amounts to a relocation of trust and a necessary shift in approach.
- **Digital saturation and social fragmentation:** The internet and social media have created unprecedented connectivity, but have also contributed to dramatically increased loneliness, anxiety, and struggles with mental health among teens.³⁷ Barna’s research on “The State of Youth Ministry” finds that teens crave real relationships and experiences of acceptance and belonging that cannot be met by programmatic content alone.³⁸
- **Fluidity of authority and belonging:** Gen Z and Gen Alpha are forming meaning through exploration and dialogue as opposed to traditional authority sources alone.³⁹ Fuller Youth Institute’s “Growing Young” research shows that intergenerational relationships, rather than age-segregated programming or pure content delivery, are the strongest predictors of faith that “sticks” from adolescence into adulthood.⁴⁰
- **Cultural pluralization:** Youth ministries can no longer presume a shared set of cultural norms, beliefs, or life experiences. According to recent data, Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history, with nearly half identifying as

35 Clark, *Hurt 2.0*; Barna Group, *The State of Youth Ministry: How Churches Reach Today’s Teens—And What Parents Think about It*. (Barna Group & Youth Specialties, 2016); Melina Lundquist Denton and Robert W. Flory, *Back Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

36 Packard, *Faithful Futures*.

37 Chris Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance: The Challenge of Developing Relational Disciples in the Internet Age,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 14, no. 2 (2017): 376–390, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131701400210>; Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Andrew B. Blake, Cooper McAllister, Hannah Lemon, and A. LeRoy, (2021). “Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness,” *Journal of Adolescence* 93 (2021): 257–269; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory* (2023); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023).

38 Barna Group, *The State of Youth Ministry*.

39 Barna Group (with Alpha & Biblica), *The Open Generation, Vol. 1–3: How Teens around the World View the Church* (Barna Group, 2023); Young Life, *The RELATE Project*, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://relate.younglife.org/>.

40 Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Baker Books, 2016).

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nonwhite. Gallup reports that over 20 percent of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQ+, a proportion significantly higher than that of previous generations. Pew Research finds that rising numbers of youth identify as religiously unaffiliated, while many who retain religious ties describe their faith in highly individualized or pluralistic terms. These shifts point to a generation navigating complex and intersecting identities across race, gender, family structure, culture, and belief.⁴¹

Questions We Still Have

- How can historically dominant North American narratives be situated alongside Black, Latino/a, AAPI, immigrant, Indigenous, rural, and disability histories without flattening their distinct logics?
- Where does professionalization help or hinder relational ecosystems, particularly as training pipelines contract?
- What mechanisms best translate local, context-specific relational practices into institution-level learning without standardizing them beyond recognition?
- How might mixed-methods or participatory designs correct blind spots in earlier research cycles?
- Are there any institutions or organizations that have convening power and trust across groups?

1.3 The Case for a “Relational Turn”

Questions We Started With

- What does the literature actually show “relational” doing in adolescent faith formation across settings, apart from program effects?
- Where do theological accounts of presence, accompaniment, and place-sharing intersect with empirical findings on belonging and intergenerational ties?
- What cautions does the literature offer against instrumentalizing relationships for outcomes rather than honoring youth as ends in themselves?

The cumulative effect of historical patterns and contemporary cultural shifts has converged on a clear consensus: Youth ministry must reclaim relationality as its foundational paradigm. This relational turn is increasingly reflected across diverse cultural and social contexts, with a broad scholarly acknowledgment that contemporary youth ministry should prioritize incarnational presence, trusted discipleship, and authentic community over rigid methodologies and predetermined outcomes.⁴²

41 Pew Research Center, *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know about Gen Z So Far* (Pew Research Center, May 14, 2020); Gallup, *LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.6%* (Gallup, 2024).

42 Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn, eds., *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2001); Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (InterVarsity Press, 2006); Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*; Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Tim Gough, “Has ‘the Incarnational Model’ Been a Theologically Helpful Influence on Modern Youth Ministry?” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 18, no. 2 (2019): 135–163.

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Andrew Root specifically warns against the instrumentalization of relationships, cautioning that treating relationships solely as strategic tools for influencing youth ultimately risks abandoning youth who do not meet predetermined benchmarks. Root's theology of "place-sharing," drawing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, emphasizes that authentic relationships characterized by shared experiences and mutual vulnerability are sacred spaces where divine presence is encountered.⁴³

Wesley Ellis critiques traditional developmental frameworks within youth ministry for reducing youth to "human becomings" rather than fully realized "human beings." Ellis insists that the spiritual formation process should affirm youths' intrinsic worth, recognizing them as sacred individuals whose current experiences, questions, and gifts deserve full acknowledgment, irrespective of their future potential.⁴⁴ Almeda Wright expands upon this framework, asserting that youth, particularly Black youth, should be viewed as active theologians whose spiritual insights and communal struggles form essential theological reflections.⁴⁵

Wright stresses that ministry practices must confront and address systemic injustices and oppressive realities; otherwise, relational ministry risks perpetuating the very harm it seeks to address. She builds on a lineage of scholars such as Anne Wimberly and Evelyn Parker, whose work on emancipatory hope in *Trouble Don't Last Always* framed the lived experiences of African American youth not merely as contexts for ministry, but as sites of theological innovation and resistance.⁴⁶ These contributions—too often sidelined as "contextual" rather than universal—offer the broader field enduring insights into relational formation, prophetic witness, and spiritual resilience.

Richelle White's commissioned essay similarly emphasizes relational approaches rooted in culturally affirming rites of passage, mentorship, and Afrocentric traditions. White underscores that effective relational ministry must intentionally engage the authentic lived experiences of Black youth, advocating an approach that "keeps it real."⁴⁷

Hispanic youth ministry scholars, including Fernando Arzola and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, advocate for prophetic approaches deeply rooted in cultural identity, social witness, and community formation.⁴⁸ Conde-Frazier specifically calls on the church to recognize youth as theologians whose lived experiences demand meaningful theological engagement and response. Hosffman Ospino's national work on parishes with Hispanic ministry frames these dynamics at the systems level. He argues that rapid demographic change has outpaced institutional adaptation in many Catholic settings, especially around language, catechesis, leadership pipelines, and parish-school coordination. A relational paradigm in these contexts gains credibility when parishes invest in bilingual formation, intercultural leadership development, and family-facing

43 Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (InterVarsity Press, 2013).

44 Wesley W. Ellis, *Youth beyond the developmental lens: Being over becoming* (Fortress Press, 2024).

45 Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*.

46 Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents* (Pilgrim Press, 2003).

47 White, *Keeping It Real*.

48 Arzola Jr., *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry*; Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families / Escuchemos a los niños: Conversaciones con familias inmigrantes* (Judson Press, 2011).

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structures that welcome whole households. In short, relationships flourish when ecclesial systems are designed to carry their weight rather than rely on goodwill alone.⁴⁹

AAPAPI scholars and practitioners have also contributed essential insights into relational youth ministry. Kim's research on South Korean contexts introduces the concept of a joyful spirituality rooted in communal harmony as foundational for youth ministry.⁵⁰ Similarly, scholars like Hong and Lee explore how second-generation AAPAPI ministries navigate cultural heritage and assimilation pressures through relational strategies that affirm identity and belonging.⁵¹

Indigenous communities, too, offer vital theological resources for reimagining relational ministry, though their perspectives remain significantly underrepresented in youth ministry scholarship. Recent frameworks like the USCCB's Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise center Indigenous voices and emphasize healing, reconciliation, and trust-building through deep listening and intergenerational story-sharing.⁵² National gatherings such as "Alive in Christ" and Journeying Together highlight how Indigenous and intercultural models of accompaniment—rooted in land, kinship, ritual, and communal memory—challenge dominant ecclesial paradigms and invite more reciprocal, embodied practices.⁵³

Beyond Catholic contexts, Indigenous Christian leaders have long emphasized relationship as both method and mission, drawing on traditions of collective discernment, extended kinship systems, and oral theological transmission. Ministries grounded in Indigenous wisdom often resist the compartmentalization of age-based programming, instead inviting youth into multigenerational patterns of leadership, storytelling, and sacred responsibility.⁵⁴ These relational models are culturally specific and theologically generative, offering the broader church a vision of formation grounded in mutuality, respect, and resilience.

Erin Raffety brings attention to the unique insights of disabled youth, critiquing developmental and inclusion models that pathologize difference. Raffety argues for ministries that fully embrace disabled youth as active contributors, leaders, and theologians, whose lived experiences and

49 Hosffman Ospino, *Hispanic Ministry in Catholic Parishes: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry* (Boston College, School of Theology and Ministry, 2014); Hosffman Ospino and Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, "Catholic Schools Serving Hispanic Families: Insights from the 2014 National Survey," *Journal of Catholic Education* 19, no. 2 (2016).

50 Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*.

51 Lee, *Youth Ministry Curriculum Developing Korean American Youth's Christ-Centered Identity*; Hong, *The History of AAPAPI Youth Ministry*.

52 USCCB, *Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise*.

53 Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, *Journeying Together: Alive in Christ* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2022) <https://www.usccb.org/committees/cultural-diversity-church/journeying-together>; Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, "Spring 2023 Newsletter on Native American Affairs" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023) <https://www.usccb.org/committees/cultural-diversity-church/spring-2023-newsletter-native-american-affairs>.

54 Randy S. Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2022).

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theological reflections have the power to transform communities by reshaping understanding around inclusion, justice, and relational care.⁵⁵

Research from large, empirical studies confirms the efficacy of what these theologically driven insights reveal about the importance of relationality in youth ministry. Findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion, Fuller Youth Institute, and Springtide Research Institute's annual reports confirm that relational embeddedness, characterized by trust, intergenerational engagement, and authentic self-discovery, consistently predicts lasting faith commitments.

Barna's Open Generation project indicates that trusted relationships and authentic role models are the most influential factors in shaping the faith of global Gen Z populations, even within digitally saturated environments.⁵⁶ Similarly, Young Life's RELATE Project underscores that relational trust precedes theological engagement, highlighting that genuine connections create essential contexts for spiritual exploration.⁵⁷ Future of Faith's recent findings further affirm that relational listening significantly shapes sustained faith engagement among youth.⁵⁸

The sum of all of this work is a general affirmation of the importance of a relational approach to ministry with youth. This confirmation emerges in numerous contexts and disciplinary approaches. While there is no universal model, and indeed should not be, there is consensus about the overall approach.

From Theory to Ecosystem

What remains an open question is *how* these insights are embedded at scale. This requires interrogating inherited systems, developing leaders able to listen across boundaries, collaborating across denominational and cultural lines, and building feedback loops for ongoing discernment and evaluation. It means equipping both lay and professional leaders not just to “do relational ministry” but to *be* communities of ongoing dialogue, accompaniment, and real partnership with youth and families.

In our interview with Kenda Dean, she captures this imperative clearly, observing, “We are high on experience and low on the structured reflection which is critical for genuine spiritual formation.” She advocates for ministries prioritizing intentional relational practices over event-driven programming, emphasizing sustained engagement, reflective spaces, and authentic community formation.

Ultimately, reclaiming relationality as the central paradigm of youth ministry extends beyond methodological adjustments; it represents a profound theological and ethical commitment. This relational turn demands that ministries intentionally engage with youth as valued, fully recognized image-bearers of God, worthy of dignity, respect, and active partnership in their

⁵⁵ Raffety's work in this area is extensive, for example: Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Baylor University Press, 2022); Justin Forbes and Raffety, Erin, eds., *Ministry with disabled youth*. (Eerdmans, forthcoming, 2026).

⁵⁶ Barna Group, *The Open Generation: A Global Teen Study* (Barna Group, 2022) <https://www.barna.com/the-open-generation/>.

⁵⁷ Young Life. *The RELATE Project*.

⁵⁸ *Sacred Listening, Deeper Faith: A Research-Driven Approach*. (Future of Faith, 2025).

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ongoing formation and spiritual journeys. Effective relational ministry thus requires deep cultural responsiveness, ongoing dialogue, adaptive flexibility, and justice-oriented engagement, forming the essential foundation for nurturing resilient, lasting faith commitments.

Dr. Rogelio Paquini summed up this position in our interview with him when he called for a missionary approach to contemporary youth ministry, urging practitioners to deeply understand and adapt to the cultural and relational contexts in which today's youth live. He notes, "We have to approach youth as missionaries do, understanding their culture, language, and context to earn their trust," reinforcing the centrality of relationships built on mutual understanding and genuine connection.

Questions We Still Have:

- How can relational methods be adapted for digital environments and nontraditional faith spaces while avoiding mere virtual "busyness"?
- What new benchmarks or "signs of fruitfulness" will help evaluate relational ministries beyond program numbers or retention rates?
- How do we prioritize contextual listening and action to ensure that Black, immigrant, rural, and neurodiverse youth (among others) can shape, rather than just receive, the relational turn?
- What sources of resilience (theological, communal, global) will sustain leaders as they work within ever-shifting cultural and ministry terrain?
- What structural changes need to be affected for the larger church to embrace relational ministry as a way of engaging and forming youth as disciples?

Part 2: Assessing Support for Relational Faith Formation

What do research, theory, and theology reveal as the essential components of relational faith formation? Rather than a single blueprint, the field has converged on a set of overlapping pillars, each indispensable, but only fully effective when woven together. The past two decades of interdisciplinary research across theology and the social sciences consistently point to five key areas where relational practices make the greatest difference in youth faith development.

First, the centrality of significant adults emerges as one of the most empirically supported findings. From empirical studies across diverse congregational contexts, it is clear that sustained relationships with trusted adults form the bedrock of spiritual formation. These adults function as faithful companions who model lived belief, embody cultural wisdom, and anchor youth amid life's transitions.

Second, research underscores that internalization of faith happens through consistent and adaptive spiritual practices. Whether through prayer, scripture, communal rituals, or artistic expression, practices that are relationally grounded and culturally resonant allow youth to own their spirituality. At the same time, it is critical that adult leaders heed and nurture their own spiritual lives. If a ministry leader does not have a committed, strong prayer life or spirituality, they will struggle to foster authentic relationships focused on discipleship and spirituality.

Third, the integration of faith and action, particularly through service, leadership, and justice engagement, emerges as essential. Studies show that youth retain faith more durably when they can connect belief to real-world responsibility and vocation. These findings confirm the importance of “embodied theology,” where faith is tested and affirmed through active, communal engagement.

Fourth, families remain foundational ecosystems for faith transmission. Despite changing definitions and structures of family, the home remains the most enduring context for religious socialization, particularly when spiritual practices are woven into daily life. Contemporary scholarship has expanded this to include chosen families, multigenerational households, and communities of care, urging ministries to support family life in all its forms.

Fifth, congregational culture and leadership structures significantly influence youth discipleship. The presence of intergenerational relationships, opportunities for shared leadership, and a communal theology of belonging correlates strongly with long-term engagement and spiritual resilience. Churches that embed youth within the fabric of community life as active partners tend to foster more lasting discipleships.

The five domains of significant adults, spiritual practices, faith in action, family ecosystems, and community belonging are not arbitrary. They surface repeatedly in studies that span denominations, cultures, and methods. While other dimensions (such as digital engagement, theological literacy, or evangelism) remain important, these five consistently appear as the relational core of effective youth ministry. Therefore, in the sections that follow, we assess the research base supporting each pillar, offering a composite picture of what relational faith formation looks like in theory and in practice.

These pillars are grounded in empirical and theological research that also reflects longstanding relational practices from communities that have discipled youth across generations without centralized programs or institutional support. In many marginalized communities, relational discipleship emerged through padrinos, abuelos, church mothers, community elders, bilingual mentors, and land-based rituals. These are not marginal variations on a theme but central expressions of the very pillars we examine here, alongside small group, programmatic youth ministries with well-trained professionals that emerged in predominantly white evangelical and mainline settings. Taken together, these diverse approaches, whether rooted in cultural tradition or formalized ministry models, demonstrate the breadth of practices that form resilient, relational faith in youth.

2.1 The Power of Significant Adults Across Cultures and Contexts

Questions We Started With:

- How important are adults such as parents, mentors, community leaders, and elders in shaping the faith formation of youth?
- Who are the “significant others” whose influence actually endures?
- Do their backgrounds, cultural identities, or styles of engagement change the nature or power of their influence?

Youth faith formation has always leaned heavily on the presence of adults whose lives and relationships embody the faith. Decades of research confirm this foundational truth: youth need consistent, authentic connections with adults who model what it looks like to live a life of faith. Detached expertise or episodic “contact work” is not enough, and neither is a one-size-fits-all approach to mentorship.

The National Study of Youth and Religion remains definitive: “The single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”⁵⁹ Yet a broader network of mentors, coaches, extended family, and other adult guides can play a decisive role in shaping lasting faith.⁶⁰ Especially for youth whose parents are absent, ambivalent, or navigating faith themselves, other trusted adults provide crucial support and spiritual modeling. Longitudinal research shows that the presence of multiple caring adults is strongly linked to faith that endures into emerging adulthood.⁶¹ Psychological studies likewise underscore the importance of these relationships: adolescents with warm, supportive parents and peers report stronger “relational spirituality,” indicating that both family and friend relationships facilitate a dynamic personal faith.⁶² In fact, recent sociological work confirms that parents remain the

⁵⁹ Recent studies show that many parents now prioritize their relationship with their children over church attendance or programming; if a child feels unwelcome or uninterested, parents often defer to the child to preserve relational trust. See Mark Gray and Jonathan Wiggins, *Transmission of Catholic Faith: A National Survey of Catholic Parents*, (Center for Applied Research [CARA], June 2024), <https://www.ncclcatholicfamilies.org/family-summit>; NCCL, “Families at the Center of Faith Formation,” *NCCL Blog*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.ncclcatholic.org/blog/families-at-the-center-of-faith-formation>.

⁶⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

⁶¹ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 295–310.

⁶² Desrosiers, Kelley, and Miller, “Parent and Peer Relationships.”

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“crucial players” in passing down religion, though the effectiveness of parental influence often hinges on consistency and support from allied adults in the community.⁶³

At the same time, contemporary scholarship reminds us that these formative relationships are experienced and enacted differently in every context. Soong-Chan Rah critiques how much of North American youth ministry has operated within a frame that often overlooks the practices and wisdom in immigrant and marginalized communities.⁶⁴ Almeda Wright, studying African American youth, demonstrates that intergenerational faith formation is deeply rooted in networks of grandparents, godparents, church elders, and other “fictive kin,” whose spiritual authority comes not from institutional titles but from embodied wisdom, storytelling, and shared resilience.⁶⁵ In many communities, faith is passed on as much through music, meals, testimony, and collective resistance to injustice as through formal teaching.

Developmental psychology research beyond church contexts affirms this principle. The Search Institute’s *Developmental Assets* framework, used in schools and youth programs worldwide, consistently identifies multiple nonparental adult relationships as being among the strongest predictors of thriving, resilience, and reduced risk behaviors.⁶⁶ Analyses show that as the number of caring adults increases, so do positive outcomes—but the gains level off after about five consistent, invested relationships, making this a practical “sweet spot” for sustainable influence. In faith communities, this translates into ensuring that every young person is known, supported, and prayed for by a diverse circle of at least five adults who embody the community’s commitments in everyday life.⁶⁷

Practice-based initiatives like the Fuller Youth Institute’s Sticky Faith and Growing Young further underscore these findings: long-term, trusting relationships with adults are among the most reliable predictors of whether a young person’s faith will “stick” into adulthood.⁶⁸ Andrew Root reminds us that these relational dynamics are not optional extras; faith is most often passed on not through content delivery or flashy events but through embodied, cross-generational presence amid the real struggles and joys of life.⁶⁹ Similarly, Chap Clark advocates for an

63 Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan C. Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 69–91; Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 156–184.

64 Kelly D. Schwartz, “Transformations in parent and friend faith support predicting adolescents’ religious faith,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16, no. 4 (2006): 311–326; Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 83–102.

65 Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*.

66 Peter C. Scales, Ta-yang Hsieh, and Peter L. Benson, “Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships,” *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (Springer, 2022), 1–29.

67 Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion and Young People 2020* (Bloomington, 2020), 13–28, 30.

68 Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Zondervan, 2011); Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

69 Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 85–124.

“adoptive church” model, urging congregations to intentionally embrace each young person as family, practicing inclusivity, empathy, and commitment that mirror the love of God.⁷⁰

For churches and ministries today, embracing this calling means intentionally cultivating connection and multiplying opportunities for youth to encounter and genuinely know faith-filled adults in diverse roles. This includes story-sharing, mutual care, and mentorships that are responsive to the unique cultures, questions, and gifts of every young person in the community. Ultimately, these relationships form the core infrastructure of long-term, inclusive discipleship.

Questions we still have:

- How can ministries better identify and equip significant adults within each unique cultural and congregational context?
- How can we ensure that the wisdom and presence of elders, mentors, and nontraditional faith leaders are recognized and integrated into the fabric of youth faith formation?
- What specific barriers prevent communities from widening the circle of adult relationships, especially in underrepresented or resource-limited settings?
- As demographic changes and migration reshape families and churches, what new models of intergenerational mentorship and relational faith formation are most effective for the next generation?

2.2 Faith Internalized Through Spiritual Practices and Learning

Questions We Started With:

- How do youth move from simply knowing about faith to internalizing and owning it?
- What makes spiritual practices transformative rather than routine?
- How do honest questioning, doubt, and cultural context affect the journey of growing a resilient faith?

Faith does not become truly one’s own through passive reception or memorization. Instead, youth internalize faith through regular engagement with spiritual practices, honest reflection, and lived experiences within their communities.⁷¹ Research across theological traditions and cultural contexts affirms that it is the ongoing rhythm of prayer, worship, study, and service—not simply acquiring information—that shapes durable faith.

These practices invite adolescents to actively participate in their spiritual journey, transforming belief from a set of external expectations into an internal compass that guides their choices, relationships, and sense of self.⁷² Notably, those who develop such personal spiritual rhythms in their teen years often carry them into emerging adulthood; studies find that young adults who

⁷⁰ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church: Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong* (Baker Academic, 2018), 33–66.

⁷¹ Richard M. Lerner, Robert W. Roeser, and Erin Phelps, eds., *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality: From Theory to Research* (Templeton Press, 2008).

⁷² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

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cultivated regular devotional practices and community involvement in high school are better prepared to navigate faith amid the challenges of college and young adulthood.⁷³

Empirical studies converge on this point. The National Study of Youth and Religion, Barna Group's research on Gen Z, and Fuller's Sticky Faith project all highlight the importance of genuine participation in faith practices rather than reliance on entertainment or programs.⁷⁴ As Andrew Root observes, the heart of youth formation lies not in clever events or surface-level relevance but in helping youth encounter the presence of God in the ordinary rhythms of life. Root critiques ministry models that treat spiritual practices as mere tools for influence or behavior management, urging instead a posture of theological attentiveness, expecting that God actually shows up in prayer, scripture, and service.⁷⁵

Along these lines, Lakisha Lockhart emphasizes the role of embodied and playful spiritual practices, like engaging the senses, imagination, and physical movement, as vital means by which youth learn and claim faith as their own. Similarly, research in charismatic and Pentecostal contexts, such as Margaret Poloma's studies on prayer and Spirit-empowered worship, underscores how experiential participation in communal and devotional life can foster a deeply internalized sense of God's presence and guidance.⁷⁶ Together, these insights affirm that faith is most likely to endure when youth are invited into practices that engage the whole person, mind, body, and spirit, and that expect God to meet them there.

Classic developmental theory, such as James Fowler's stages of faith, describes adolescence as a pivotal time for moving from borrowed to personal faith.⁷⁷ Contemporary practical theologians reaffirm this. Kenda Creasy Dean, for example, emphasizes that teenagers seek to form a "claim" of their own, testing boundaries and negotiating identity as they move toward an integrated faith.⁷⁸ Likewise, Chap Clark's research into the hidden world of adolescents suggests that many teens experience a sense of abandonment or disconnection that forces them to reconcile their inherited beliefs with real-life struggles.⁷⁹ Many mainline Protestant practices fit neatly into this model such as Lutheran and other practices of confirmation and Catholic catechesis.

Such exploration, questioning, and even experimentation are normal and necessary steps toward a faith that is truly internalized. Mark DeVries warns that in an effort to keep youth busy and happy, many ministries fill the calendar with events and programs but leave little room for slow, deep spiritual growth. Without space for silence, honest conversation, and reflection, youth may become well-entertained yet poorly formed. DeVries advocates for a more sustainable model that

⁷³ David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2013), 33–62.

⁷⁴ Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Barna Group, 2018), 34–38; Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*; Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, "A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2009): 293–307.

⁷⁵ Andrew Root, *The End of Youth Ministry?* (Baker Academic, 2020), 92–113.

⁷⁶ Margaret M. Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton, "Exploring Types of Prayer and Quality of Life: A Research Note" *Review of Religious Research* (1989): 46–53.

⁷⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper & Row, 1981).

⁷⁸ Dean, *Almost Christian*.

⁷⁹ Clark, *Hurt 2.0*.

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prioritizes relational rhythms over frenetic activity, an approach closely aligned with cultivating inward devotion rather than just external participation.⁸⁰

Effective faith formation meets youth in this liminal space with trustworthy relationships and open-ended environments, scaffolding the journey from inherited faith toward a reflective, owned conviction. Ministries need not fear doubt; they can embrace it as a vital part of growth, offering companionship and guiding wisdom as youth sort through competing voices and experiences. Practice-based formation, then, is not about mechanical repetition but about creating “containers” where spiritual practices are modeled and adapted to youths’ unique needs and identities. In relational children’s ministry contexts, for instance, adult leaders learn to turn routine activities into opportunities for mentorship and discipleship, allowing youth to experiment and take leadership in age-appropriate ways.⁸¹

Wesley Ellis offers a distinctive theological framework by describing adolescence as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood.⁸² Ellis resists the impulse to view youth as incomplete adults or idealized children. Instead, he calls for ministry that honors the in-between by cultivating spiritual practices that are participatory, relational, and transformative. Such practices should not seek to resolve ambiguity too quickly but rather accompany youth through mystery, tension, and becoming. In this view, the goal is not certainty but companionship through a sacred and unfolding process of identity, belonging, and belief.

Youth who are empowered to wrestle with scripture, prayer, doubt, and their own experiences are far more likely to develop an integrated spirituality that can weather the complexities of adult life.⁸³ Studies indicate a critical distinction: Churches that create safe space for questions tend to cultivate young adults who synthesize faith and life, rather than those who abandon faith under pressure. In other words, faith formation is not about shielding youth from tough questions but about equipping them to engage those questions with curiosity, responsibility, and support.⁸⁴

Yet practice alone is not sufficient; the context and cultural resonance of practices matter deeply.⁸⁵ Cross-cultural research demonstrates that spiritual formation is richest when it honors youths’ own stories, rituals, and lived experiences. For example, studies of Korean American and African American youth ministries reveal that faith is made real through practices that intertwine

80 Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn’t Last and What Your Church Can Do About It* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), 33–47. *hy Most Youth Ministry Doesn’t Last and What Your Church Can Do About It* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 33–47.

81 Dan Lovaglia, with foreword by Jim Burns, *Relational Children’s Ministry: Turning Kid Influencers into Lifelong Disciple Makers* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), 24–47.

82 Wesley W. Ellis, *Youth Beyond the Developmental Lens: Being over Becoming* (Fortress Press, 2024).

83 Arthur David Canales, “A Noble Quest: Cultivating Christian Spirituality in Catholic Adolescents and the Usefulness of 12 Pastoral Practices,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 14, no. 1 (2009): 63–77.

84 Christine Youn Hung, “Tethered to the Body: Reimagining Youth Ministry as Intergenerational Formation,” in *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (ACU Press, 2018), 199–210.

85 Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Abingdon, 2005), 61–83.

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cultural heritage through practices such as communal storytelling, music, embodied prayer, and justice-oriented service, rather than through isolated formal teaching.⁸⁶

In many Latino/a faith communities, spiritual life is passed between generations by means of oral testimony, festivals, intergenerational mentorship, and rituals of hospitality, which serve as “living catechism” for youth.⁸⁷ Lakisha Lockhart reminds us that embodied and playful practices are not peripheral to faith formation; they can be central, especially for youth from historically marginalized communities. Lockhart and other scholars argue that cultural expression through art, music, movement, and storytelling is itself a theological act.⁸⁸

When youth are invited to bring their full cultural selves into their spiritual practices, the result is not only deeper engagement but a lived theology connecting belief with belonging. When faith practices are woven together with ethnic identity, family history, and community struggle, youth are more likely to invest their whole selves in faith, leading to a greater sense of ownership and resilience.

Whether through communal worship, peer group discussions, family rituals, or service projects, what matters most is that youth have agency to participate, question, and contribute, and that they experience a warm welcome as full members of the faith community. Christine Youn Hung makes a compelling case for intergenerational integration, arguing that faith is not internalized in isolation but through belonging to the whole Body of Christ.⁸⁹

Youth ministry must resist becoming a silo; instead, youth should be deeply connected to the wider church. When teenagers are included in worship, leadership, and decision-making alongside adults, they are more likely to see their faith as both communal and continuous, something they carry personally but never have to carry alone.

Questions We Still Have:

- Which spiritual practices are most formative for different cultures and contexts?
- How can faith communities adapt ancient rhythms (prayer, liturgy, Sabbath, service) to new generational realities without losing depth?
- What training and support do mentors and peers need to foster truly open, honest spiritual exploration with youth?
- How can experiences of doubt or struggle be reframed as catalysts, rather than threats, to a lasting, resilient faith?

⁸⁶ Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*; Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*; Kil Jae Park, *Body, Identity, and Ministry: Toward a Practical Theology of the Body Which Can Inform the Formation of Korean American Identity and the Practice of Korean American Family Ministry* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003).

⁸⁷ Eduardo C. Fernández, *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972–1998)* (Liturgical Press, 2000).

⁸⁸ Tamara Henry. “Reimagining Religious Education for Young, Black, Christian Women: Womanist Resistance in the Form of Hip-Hop,” *Religions* 9, no. 12 (2018): 409. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9120409>; Lakisha Lockhart, “Playing Church: Towards a Practical Theology of Play and Embodied Faith Formation,” in *Cultivating Teen Faith: Insights from The Confirmation Project*, ed. Richard R. Osmer and Katherine M. Douglass (Eerdmans, 2018), 135–150.

⁸⁹ Youn Hung, “Tethered to the Body.”

2.3 Faith Applied Through Service

Questions We Started With:

- How does faith move from internal conviction to real-life action in the lives of youth?
- What kinds of service, leadership, and engagement foster ownership, agency, and belonging across different cultures and congregations?
- In what ways do opportunities for meaningful participation shape the journey of lifelong discipleship?

Across Christian traditions and cultural contexts, youth tend to grow in faith when they are offered opportunities not merely to learn about discipleship but to embody it through service, leadership, and engagement with their neighbors. As missiologist David Livermore cautions, however, service must be approached with cultural intelligence and mutuality; otherwise it can devolve into charity that reinforces stereotypes rather than mission that reflects Christ's love.⁹⁰ When done well, though, acts of service become "living classrooms" for vocational discernment and embodied discipleship, especially when youth participate in reciprocal partnerships that value their insights and energy.⁹¹

This dynamic echoes Almeda Wright's observation that faith formation is inherently embodied and justice-oriented, particularly within the lived experiences of African American adolescents.⁹² Wright argues that discipleship deepens as youth "improvise faith" in contexts of racial injustice, historical memory, and communal resilience. Similarly, urban youth ministry scholar Fernando Arzola Jr. contends that effective ministry in under-resourced communities must be unabashedly prophetic, bridging evangelism with social action so that young believers see pursuing justice as a core expression of their faith.⁹³

Empirical studies reinforce the importance of action for cementing faith. The National Study of Youth and Religion found that emerging adults who had real opportunities to serve or lead during their teen years retained higher levels of religious commitment and a deeper sense of purpose in their faith.⁹⁴ Contemporary research likewise highlights agency as a decisive factor: Karen Marie Yust notes that when youth are trusted with meaningful responsibility, they feel more engaged and invested in faith communities, whereas youth who are perpetually sidelined often drift away.

Latino/a congregations often treat service as the on-ramp to leadership. A multi-site study of Latino/a youth by Tamez-Méndez found that stronger participation in parish life aligns with greater involvement in social service and concrete leadership tasks, with growth most visible

90 David A. Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Baker Books, 2013), 97–110.

91 Don C. Richter, *Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World* (Upper Room, 2008), 36–58.

92 Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*.

93 Fernando, *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry*.

94 Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

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among older teens.⁹⁵ The design implication is clear: build recurring service-learning cycles that pair practice with reflection and give youth real roles, iterative feedback, and community-facing projects that honor cultural assets and agency.

Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Jake Mulder describe this dynamic as “vocational discipleship,” where teenagers learn to see their everyday work and future aspirations as arenas for living out their faith.⁹⁶ Rahn and Linhart reinforce this with concrete practices that position students as everyday witnesses in schools, teams, and neighborhoods.⁹⁷ In congregations that effectively develop young leaders, youth begin to imagine their roles in church, school, and society as callings, part of God’s mission. Barna’s research supports this: churches that are flourishing tend to be those where teens and young adults are visible, valued, and empowered throughout the life of the congregation.⁹⁸

Service is especially formative when it is rooted in youths’ cultural communities and connected to real-world issues. In many Latino/a congregations, for instance, faith is passed on as teenagers collaborate with parents and elders in festivals, community celebrations, and works of mercy—forms of service that may not be formalized as “programs” but are central to lived discipleship.

These examples remind us that “service” is not a culturally neutral practice; it must be interpreted and embodied in ways that resonate with youths’ own backgrounds and contexts. Intergenerational dimensions of applied faith are also significant. Recent research into intergenerational Christian formation affirms that when young people and older adults serve together, whether in worship, outreach, or community care, those experiences act as bridges between generations, fostering mutual learning and blessing.⁹⁹ In churches that embrace this, teenagers are not relegated to a youth group bubble; instead, they work side by side with elders and mentors on equal footing.

Such collaboration broadens youths’ theological and vocational imagination while also reinvigorating the wider church with fresh energy and insight. Similarly, Dan Lovaglia emphasizes that relational ministry is most powerful when it positions youth not just as learners but as contributors whose gifts are vital to the community’s flourishing.¹⁰⁰ In churches he studied, teenagers helped design worship elements, led service projects, and even co-taught or co-led ministries with adults, demonstrating that meaningful engagement requires trust, training, and a shared leadership mindset. Moments of true collaboration become sacred ground for transformation, for the youth involved and for the congregation as a whole.

95 Elizabeth Tamez Méndez, *Leadership Development Among Youth in Latino Congregations: The Relationship of Religious Participation to Social Service Involvement and Engagement in Leadership Tasks* [PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 2018].

96 Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*.

97 Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart, *Evangelism Remixed: Empowering Students for Courageous and Contagious Faith* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009).

98 Barna Group, *The State of Youth Ministry*.

99 Holly Catterton Allen et al., *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 2023).

100 Dan Lovaglia, *Relational Children’s Ministry*.

Of course, there are pitfalls to avoid. Leaders caution against reducing service to a checklist or a résumé-builder for college.¹⁰¹ Kara Powell and Brad Griffin warn that short-term mission trips or volunteer projects can become “drive-by service” if there is no depth or follow-up to well-meaning activities that do little to address systemic issues or to shape lasting faith commitments.¹⁰² Instead, they advocate embedding service in a reflective cycle: careful preparation, thoughtful action, communal reflection, and integration of lessons learned back into everyday life.

Likewise, Whiteman’s cultural intelligence lens reminds us that effective service should empower and dignify those being served, and transform those serving, rather than reinforcing an us-versus-them dynamic.¹⁰³ When youth engage in sustained, contextually relevant service, whether through long-term local outreach, justice advocacy, or deep partnerships abroad, they have the chance to wrestle with complex realities, practice compassion, and witness the impact of persevering commitment. These experiences, especially when paired with mentorship and theological reflection, often give rise to what Amanda Drury calls “testimony-rich” faith formation, as youth learn to articulate where they have seen God at work through their service and how it shapes their own story. In Catholic settings, this is often referred to as youth becoming “protagonists” in their own stories following Pope Francis’ call in *Christus Vivit* and the 2018 Synod on Young People.¹⁰⁴

Questions We Still Have:

- What forms of service and leadership give youth the deepest sense of ownership and agency, especially in marginalized or multicultural communities?
- How can congregations create pathways for youth to lead that are not tokenistic but genuinely empowering?
- What support and mentoring are needed to help youth reflect theologically on their service experiences (so that mission is not just a task but a transformation)?
- How might churches cultivate a long-term culture of shared ministry that values the insights and gifts of the younger generation as indispensable to the body of Christ?

2.4 Family Engagement

Questions We Started With:

- What unique roles do families play in nurturing faith beyond what can be accomplished by congregations, mentors, or programs?
- How are contemporary changes in family forms, structures, and cultural expectations reshaping the dynamics of faith transmission?
- What tools, rituals, and patterns best empower families, across their diversity, to be effective agents of spiritual formation?

101 Jen Bradbury, *A Mission That Matters: How to Do Short-Term Missions Without Long-Term Harm*. (Abingdon Press, 2018).

102 Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, *Sticky Faith Service Guide: Moving Students from Mission Trips to Missional Living* (Zondervan, 2016), 17–31.

103 Darrell L. Whiteman, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness* (Baker Books 2024).

104 Pope Francis. *Christus Vivit*.

The formation of faith, identity, and vocation often begins and is continually reinforced in the intricate dynamics of family life.¹⁰⁵ While the transformative role of adult mentors and church communities has been addressed above, it is families that hold a privileged and foundational position in the lasting transmission of belief and practice. In classic models of faith formation (for example, early Christian “domestic churches” and the apprenticeship systems of Jewish and African village societies), the multigenerational household functioned as the first school of spirituality, infusing daily life with rituals, moral instruction, and a sense of sacred responsibility.¹⁰⁶ Children learned by participating in communal tasks, listening to family stories, rehearsing religious rites, and observing the lived example of parents, grandparents, and other kin. Even the Protestant Reformers’ emphasis on individual Bible reading assumed that parents would teach their children to read, question, and discern within the context of daily household rhythms.¹⁰⁷

Today’s families take countless forms: single-parent and multigenerational households, foster and adoptive families, grandparent-led homes, kin networks spread across borders, blended and stepfamilies, LGBTQ+ families, “chosen” families among friends, and more. Each context shapes the experience of faith transmission in distinct ways. Empirical research still affirms that family engagement, regardless of form, remains strongly correlated with the continuity and vitality of faith into adulthood.¹⁰⁸

Yet the means of effective faith transmission often look different in each setting. In grandparent-headed households, for instance, spiritual wisdom is often passed down through storytelling, caregiving routines, and the sharing of generational memory (including the navigation of trauma and loss). In immigrant and refugee families, faith formation frequently weaves together languages, practices, and customs from multiple homelands, with youth sometimes becoming cultural “brokers” or translators in the process.¹⁰⁹ Conde-Frazier’s bilingual interviews surface the lived friction of separation, reunification, and bilingual homes that are often a part of this dynamic and give churches concrete ways to listen and respond.¹¹⁰ Family faith for children in foster care or group homes may be sustained by a patchwork of relationships and rituals, anchored as much by godparents, mentors, or older siblings as by biological parents.

Relational approaches to discipleship contend that faith is most effectively formed through ongoing, emotionally attuned, and authentic interactions. As work hours lengthen, schedules fragment, and digital technology permeates home life, families are both more “connected” and often more distracted. Experts caution against reducing faith formation to a series of “inputs”

105 Diana R. Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (IVP Academic, 2012), 201–238.

106 David Ng and Virginia Thomas, *Children in the Worshiping Community* (John Knox Press, 1981), 12–35.

107 John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Revised ed. Morehouse, 2012), 48–66; Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “African Christian Traditions and Transmission,” in *Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity* (Brill, 2016), 837–854.

108 Bengtson et al., *Families and Faith*; Gabriella Pusztai and Gergely Rosta, “Does Home or School Matter More? The Effect of Family and Institutional Socialization on Religiosity: The Case of Hungarian Youth,” *Education Sciences* 13, no. 12 (2023): 1209.

109 Pyong Gap Min and Dae Young Kim, “Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Culture: Korean Protestants in the U.S.,” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 263–282.

110 Conde-Frazier, *Listen to the Children / Escuchemos a los niños*.

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(such as attending worship or completing Bible lessons) in the absence of deeper relational engagement. Mark Matlock reminds us that faith must grow through curiosity and meaningful spiritual conversation—not mere programming or content delivery.¹¹¹ From a womanist theological perspective, Monica A. Coleman warns that when spiritual formation is treated as transactional rather than relational, it strips away the communal, embodied practices that make faith life-giving and transformative.¹¹²

Instead, the vibrancy of family faith emerges through practices like shared meals, storytelling, cross-generational service, collaborative meaning-making, holiday celebrations, and open conversations about doubt, failure, and hope.¹¹³ For families navigating marginalization or heavy stress, these practices also create spaces of resistance, healing, and identity formation. Research among African American, Indigenous, Latino/a, and AAPI Christian communities shows that home-based faith rituals such as oral history, music, hospitality, and remembrance of ancestors serve as acts of resilience and affirmations of collective dignity in the face of societal pressures.¹¹⁴

While the family holds unique influence, that influence is neither automatic nor immune to pressure. Socioeconomic factors, inherited trauma, systemic inequalities, and the rapid pace of cultural change all shape a family's capacity to sustain meaningful faith traditions.¹¹⁵ In many contexts, the nuclear family is not the norm, requiring faith communities to broaden their definition of kinship and support, equipping youth who may have diverse experiences of "home." Young people in blended, foster, or fluid family structures may sometimes feel overlooked by traditional ministry resources, making culturally responsive support essential.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, studies find that parental modeling is most effective when it is congruent (when parents truly "practice what they preach") and when it is supported by a network of allied adults, including godparents, relatives, neighbors, and church members, who reinforce the family's values and faith commitments.¹¹⁷ If parents' actions contradict their words, or if a family feels isolated in its faith, young people are less likely to internalize that faith. Conversely, when young people see belief authentically lived out at home and echoed by a wider community, they receive a double witness of what faith looks like in practice.¹¹⁸

111 Mark Matlock, *Faith for the Curious: How an Era of Spiritual Openness Shapes the Way We Live and Help Others Follow Jesus* (Baker Books, 2024).

112 Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Fortress Press, 2008).

113 Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Family, Faith, and Formation: Lessons from African American Christian Education," *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (2001): 45–64.

114 Luke Eric Lassiter, Clyde Ellis, and Ralph Kotay, *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, updated ed. (Oxford University Press, 2004); Carolyn Chen and Russell Jeung, eds., *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation* (New York University Press, 2012).

115 Diana R. Garland, "Rethinking 'Family' in Family Ministry," *Practical Theology* 9, no. 1 (2016): 84–93.

116 Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Chalice Press, 2005), 141–172.

117 Bengtson et al., *Families and Faith*; Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 156–184.

118 For a great early description of the psychological research in support of modeling, see Lawrence O. Richards' influential textbook *A Theology of Christian Education* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1975).

A range of studies illustrates how diverse family structures and cultural identities uniquely influence faith formation practices. For example:

- **Indigenous communities:** Faith and tradition are often woven through interlocking circles of extended kin and community, with elders (whether blood relatives or “fictive kin”) imparting spiritual wisdom through storytelling, ceremonies, and acts of service.¹¹⁹
- **Interfaith or blended-belief families:** Parents in mixed-faith homes may create hybrid rituals celebrating multiple religious holidays, crafting inclusive prayers, or maintaining more than one sacred space to honor each tradition while nurturing a spirit of inquiry and respect in their children.¹²⁰
- **LGBTQ+ families and “chosen” families:** Shared meals, intentional hospitality, pride celebrations, and creative liturgies become acts of sacred witness. By crafting rituals of blessing and remembrance that affirm each member’s belovedness, these families cultivate a theology of welcome and resilience in the face of exclusion.¹²¹
- **African diaspora communities:** Traditions like “godparenthood” and informal adoption remain strong, illustrating that a family system is always broader than biology. Churches and neighborhoods expect multiple adults to help raise each child in the faith, a communal ethos that supports belief across generations.

Implications for Ministry Practice

In this complex landscape, faith communities are called to resource a wide spectrum of families with tools, liturgies, and community practices that honor and empower all configurations of home. Rituals like mealtime prayers, bedtime blessings, seasonal festivals, and neighborhood service projects can be made accessible and flexible, inviting participation from children, parents, grandparents, and non-parent caregivers alike. Churches and ministries may need to shift from deficit models (“fix struggling families”) to partnership paradigms, recognizing parents and caregivers as co-pastors of their households. For example, churches can offer simple prayer cards, milestone celebrations, or books of blessings tailored to each stage of childhood, giving caregivers practical tools to weave faith into daily routines.

Rather than treating families as mere recipients of ministry, effective approaches engage them as partners and co-creators in nurturing young disciples.¹²² The most fruitful family-based faith formation is less about achieving a particular “outcome” and more about cultivating an environment of mutual grace, curiosity, and hospitality, one where young people and adults alike invite God’s presence into the ever-changing lived experiences of home.

Questions We Still Have:

- What emerging best practices can equip families of all shapes and sizes to foster faith at home?

119 Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. “Tink” Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Orbis Books, 2001), 85–106.

120 Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Beacon Press, 2016), 67–91.

121 Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Beacon Press, 2016), 43–62.

122 Jim Burns and Mark DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry* (Bethany House, 2011), 23–51.

- How can churches develop resources *with* families (especially those who feel marginalized or overwhelmed) rather than impose one-size-fits-all programs?
- In what ways might congregations adapt their worship and community life to better integrate youth and young adults alongside their families?
- What support networks do caregivers, siblings, and nontraditional kin need to become confident, creative, and resilient faith formers in this generation?

2.5 Community and Leadership Support

Questions We Started With:

- What does it mean for a congregation to genuinely integrate and empower its young people, rather than relegate them to the periphery?
- How do intergenerational belonging and shared leadership shape durable, transformative faith outcomes, particularly for those from historically excluded or marginalized groups?
- What must faith communities do, both structurally and relationally, to move from age-segregated programming to a whole-church culture of collaboration, participation, and renewal?

While mentoring and family support lay critical foundations, young people require more than personal relationships. They flourish in congregations that actively reimagine themselves as layers of mutual presence, leadership, and purpose, where young and old together shape the rhythms, decisions, and witness of the community. Across the world and across traditions, research and lived experience converge: faith endures and deepens when young people are integrated not as a sidelined project or an isolated enclave, but as full, recognized partners in worship, service, and communal discernment.¹²³

Historically, many faith traditions rooted their continuity in intergenerational transmission, apprenticeship, and rites of passage that initiated young people directly into the heart of communal life through ritual, such as confirmation, mentoring by elders, and shared worship.¹²⁴ In countless Indigenous and African diasporic contexts, elders and young people have long shared the rituals and the stewardship of story, land, and collective wisdom. Contemporary research underscores that, in such settings, including in Latino/a, AAPI, and Black churches, faith identity is sustained through public recognition, real responsibility, and the visible use of young people's gifts.¹²⁵

However, modern socio-religious dynamics such as institutional professionalization, age-graded educational systems, and the rise of youth-specific subcultures have often fragmented these

123 Merton P. Strommen, Karen E. Jones, and Dave Rahn, eds., *Youth Ministry That Transforms* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2001); Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry* (EYM Publishing, 2010), 45–73.

124 Valerie Grissom, ed., *All Ages Becoming: Intergenerational Practice in the Formation of God's People* (Abilene Christian University Press, 2023).

125 Elizabeth Tamez Méndez, "Being Familia: Latino Intergenerational Connections—Honoring Our Generational and Cultural Treasures," in *All Ages Becoming: Intergenerational Practice in the Formation of God's People*, ed. Valerie Grissom (Abilene Christian University Press, 2023), 227–242; Augustine, *Recreating Our Sacred Safe Spaces*; Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*.

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intergenerational connections in what is often referred to derisively as the “one-eared Mickey Mouse model.” As a consequence, youth ministry sometimes operated as a “silo” or even a holding tank, unintentionally emphasizing separation or entertainment over shared purpose and partnership. This trend is observed in many North American congregations, where children and teens are physically present yet largely segregated from the congregation’s worship and leadership.¹²⁶

Communities that seek to be truly formative and inclusive must intentionally design for difference across lines of culture, race, language, and life experience. In multiethnic churches, meaningful integration means not only welcoming diversity but actively decentering any single cultural norm (often Western or white norms) to make space for a spectrum of worship styles and leadership expressions.¹²⁷ For example, some urban Black congregations mobilize young people as co-organizers of justice initiatives, as worship liturgists and even preachers, and as vital voices in setting community priorities.

In Latino/a and immigrant churches, young people often serve as cultural navigators helping adapt music, technology, and outreach so that the congregation’s future is possible across languages and generations.¹²⁸ AAPI congregations, negotiating between immigrant heritage and American church culture, have found creative ways for young people and adults to collaborate: joint mission projects, bilingual prayer gatherings, and youth representation on church councils, to name a few.¹²⁹ Key to authentic integration is resisting both tokenism (“youth Sunday”) and paternalism (“let’s give the youth a seat but not real influence”).

Latino/a congregations can offer a clear template for intergenerational belonging. Tamez Méndez’s “Being Familia” frames intergenerational practice as honoring cultural treasures while giving teens voice in worship, service, and governance.¹³⁰ Building on that, Calvillo shows how Latino/a Protestant churches sustain ethnic identity through tight organizational and affective bonds across generations—ties that keep young people embedded in community life rather than siloed by age.¹³¹ Together, their contributions affirm *familia* as both structure and strategy: shared leadership, bilingual spaces, close-knit intergenerational relationships, and rites that tie young people to congregational purpose.

The question is not retention of young people but attention to them. How do ministries attend to meaning-making, agency, and leadership among young people who already show strong religious engagement? Effective work embraces *familia* and collectivist decision-making

126 Holly Catterton Allen and Jason Brian Santos, “Intergenerational Ministry—a Forty-Year Perspective: 1980–2020,” *Christian Education Journal* 17, no. 3 (2020): 506–529.

127 Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2014); Hosffman Ospino, “Leadership in Parishes with Hispanic Ministry: Realities and Possibilities,” *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 46, no. 4 (2018): 393–403, doi:10.1080/10852352.2018.1507499.

128 Fernández, *La Cosecha*.

129 Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*.

130 Tamez Méndez, “Being Familia.”

131 Jonathan Calvillo, “Intergenerational Ties in Latinx Protestant Congregations: Sustaining Ethnicity through Organizational and Affective Connections,” *Religions* 10, no. 9 (2019): Article 504, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090504>.

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dynamics, not Anglo program logics. Tamez Méndez proposes “roots and wings” frameworks: anchor young people in communal identity and tradition (roots) while launching them into leadership and mission (wings) through networked, intercongregational collaborations that expand capacity and belonging.¹³²

The most transformative communities cultivate feedback loops where young people and adults learn alongside one another, not in a top-down hierarchy but a horizontal arrangement of trust that can positively impact both faith and secular outcomes.¹³³ Strategic initiatives may include all-ages small groups, intergenerational service projects, rotating leadership roles in worship, and governance processes that intentionally include a range of ages, languages, and perspectives in every major decision.¹³⁴ A field-level synthesis confirms the pattern: Latino/a congregations across traditions generate measurable social capital while navigating distinctive leadership pipeline gaps and formation needs.¹³⁵

Theologically, rich resources for intergenerational community lie in the identity of the Church itself, not as an organization, but as a living body where each member’s flourishing is inseparable from the rest. John Westerhoff’s classic question, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, insisted not only on faith’s transmission but on the renewal of the entire community through the presence and questions of its young people.¹³⁶

Recent practical theology lifts up concepts like “intergenerational ecclesiology” and “shared discipleship,” which recognize that all members, regardless of age, have indispensable gifts and interpretive wisdom to offer. Communities that practice lament, celebration, and discernment together grow in resilience and adaptability. Storytelling, whether through public testimonies, generational storytelling events, or intentional sharing of church history, helps young people find their place in the broader narrative, while older members are invited to see the future of the church through the eyes of its youth.¹³⁷

A shift toward whole-church integration is often a call for systemic change. Congregations must audit and adapt what counts as leadership, who is heard in decision-making bodies, how worship is planned and led, and where young people can exercise their gifts. This may involve retraining both adults and young people in collaborative leadership and cross-generational communication, as well as commitments to restorative conflict resolution when generational and cultural tensions arise.

Churches should invest in spaces (physical and virtual) that encourage unprogrammed interaction, build multi-age teams, and create feedback mechanisms to ensure that young people are not only present, but centrally involved in shaping the community’s mission, vision, and

132 Tamez Méndez, “Rethinking Latino Youth Ministry.”

133 Esmeralda Sanchez et al., “Latino Congregations and Youth Educational Expectations,” *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 2 (2016): 171–192.

134 Youn Hung, “Tethered to the Body.”

135 Edwin Hernández, Milagros Peña, and Kenneth Davis. *Emerging Voices, Urgent Choices: Essays on Latino/a Religious Leadership*, vol. 4. (Brill, 2006).

136 John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Revised ed., Morehouse, 2012), 117–134.

137 Grissom, *All Ages Becoming*.

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daily life.¹³⁸ Leaders, both lay and ordained, need ongoing support and formation to cultivate a culture where all ages teach and learn from one another. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to include young people for the sake of retention, but to become a more faithful church where each member, regardless of age or background, can belong and contribute, and where the Holy Spirit works through the whole body to “build itself up in love.”

Questions We Still Have:

- How can faith communities move beyond symbolic inclusion to real, daily partnership between generations?
- What models can bridge barriers of language, class, culture, and digital life to create a truly interwoven community?
- What resources and structural supports do leaders need to cultivate “bodies of Christ” where all members can belong and contribute fully?
- How will empowering young people as co-leaders today reshape the future of faith communities tomorrow?

Conclusion

Taken together, these five pillars are deeply embedded in the lived experiences of diverse communities. For many, relational discipleship is sustained through cultural practices of collective memory, intergenerational reciprocity, and spiritual resilience, often without formal structures or institutional support. At the same time, other models have contributed significantly to the visibility, professionalization, and theological development of youth ministry as a field and have pioneered small-group mentoring, leadership training, and pastoral care structures that continue to shape best practices today. The future of youth ministry does not lie in choosing between these approaches, but in weaving them together, listening to the voices that have sustained relational discipleship across contexts, and learning from each stream’s distinct strengths.

¹³⁸ Garland, *Family Ministry*.

Part 3: What's Missing

3.1 Effective Alternatives

Questions We Started With:

- What models, other than relational approaches, are finding success or gaining traction with young people?
- How do different cultural, theological, or structural contexts favor certain ministry approaches over others?
- What are the underlying mechanisms of faith formation in models that do not prioritize long-term, one-on-one mentorship?

Introduction

The preceding sections have built a compelling case for the primacy of relational discipleship in contemporary youth ministry. An essential component of any good scholarship, however, is negative case analysis, the practice of actively seeking out data that challenges emerging patterns or theoretical claims. With that in mind, we went looking for scholarship and practices that might upset the basic premise of a universal shift toward relational ministry. This section presents the findings of that search.

The models described here are not offered as a comprehensive catalog, nor are they necessarily exclusive of relationship. Rather, their central organizing principle or “engine” of formation may be something other than ongoing mentorship, with deep relationships often emerging as a powerful *fruit* of a shared experience, rather than the *root* of the strategy. Drawing on what practical theologian Craig Dykstra calls an “ecclesial imagination,” we can see the Spirit moving through art, ritual, and event as powerfully as through long-term accompaniment, reminding us that no single method holds a monopoly on spiritual transformation.¹³⁹

In addition to alternative models organized around particular practices or formats, many youth ministries have grounded their work in what might be called a “Jesus-obsessed” approach. These ministries center not first on relational strategy or formation theory, but on an intentional, explicit pursuit of Jesus as the animating presence and pattern of discipleship. Rather than treating relationality as a methodology to be studied or scaled, this approach begins with an encounter with Jesus as both the content and context of transformation and trusts that the shape of ministry will emerge from that center. Its adherents often describe their work less in terms of frameworks and more in terms of clarity, passion, and fidelity to the life and teachings of Christ.

Leaders like Dann Spader (Sonlife) and Barry St. Clair (Jesus-Focused Youth Ministry) helped solidify this instinct in the 1980s, drawing directly from the Gospels to shape youth ministry practices that mirrored Jesus’ relational rhythms. The WWJD movement, Rick Lawrence’s *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*, and more recently, John Mark Comer’s work all reflect this persistent intuition: that the heart of youth ministry is not merely relationality, but the living presence of Christ. Movements like Alpha and Dare 2 Share echo this same impulse globally, often thriving outside academic or institutional circles. In contexts shaped by colonization, diaspora, and oppression, the name of Jesus has long functioned not as an abstract doctrine but as

139 Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (WJK Press, 1999).

a liberating presence, as seen in the preaching of Latin American base communities, the spirituals of the Black Church, or the altar calls of Filipino Pentecostal revivals.

For many formed by the Jesus Movement and its aftermath, this focus is not anti-intellectual but pre-theoretical and serves as a vivid reminder that transformation begins with a person, not a program. This approach resonates not only within evangelical and charismatic movements—where an explicit focus on Jesus often animates worship, evangelism, and discipleship—but also within mainline traditions that emphasize following the way of Jesus as a lifelong, justice-rooted vocation. Across theological spectra, ministries rooted in the person of Jesus continue to offer a compelling center of gravity for young people seeking authenticity, purpose, and hope, even if giving academic study and measurement to such approaches has lagged.

3.2 Vivid Alternatives in Practice

Immersive Pilgrimages and Retreats

The power of short-term, intensive experiences such as retreats and camps has deep roots in Christian tradition. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of liminality, these events function by temporarily removing young people from their ordinary social structures.¹⁴⁰ In this “in-between” state, normal hierarchies are suspended and vulnerability is heightened, making participants uniquely open to new self-understanding and divine encounter. Many practitioners have observed how a single week at camp can accomplish what months of weekly programming cannot, precisely because of this immersive disruption. When intentionally connected to ongoing congregational life, these experiences become powerful catalysts for what John Westerhoff termed “Owned Faith,” where inherited beliefs are tested, internalized, and made their own.¹⁴¹

Digital Discipleship and Networked Belonging

For a growing number of young people, digital spaces have become sanctuaries for faith exploration, especially for those unable to participate in traditional church life. As scholar Angela Gorrell notes, young people are often using their devices not to escape, but to “reach for belonging.”¹⁴² These online communities function as what Heidi Campbell calls “networked religion,” where authority is distributed and belonging is constructed through shared practice and conversation rather than institutional presence.¹⁴³ Networks for young LGBTQ+ Christians, for example, demonstrate that authentic pastoral care and community can transcend physical proximity. Recently, the movement to support “digital missionaries” has gained traction in the Catholic Church, with many of those faith influencers reaching young populations.

High-Production Megachurch Models

The American megachurch presents another distinct model, often built around high-energy, event-based programming. Leveraging sophisticated production, these ministries create a large-group experience that is both attractive and spiritually engaging, serving as a “front door” to a well-organized system of small groups. In this hybrid approach, the energy of the large gathering

140 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Aldine, 1969).

141 Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

142 Angela Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Baker Academic, 2019).

143 Heidi Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013).

provides momentum that fuels smaller connections. Sociologists like Scott Thumma have noted that this model's success lies in its ability to offer both high-quality, inspirational events and structured pathways into community, effectively blending the "attractional" with the "relational."¹⁴⁴

Arts Collectives and Embodied Faith

The creative process itself functions as a powerful form of discipleship. This is a central aspect of Latino/a spirituality and identity development and has been core to youth development and spirituality in Latino/a U.S. communities. Latino/a neighborhoods in the U.S. illustrate how public art itself becomes catechesis. Murals in places like San Francisco's Mission District, Chicago's Pilsen and Little Village, and San Antonio's West Side embody a visual theology that integrates culture, memory, and faith.¹⁴⁵

Kenda Creasy Dean's work on "practicing passion" suggests that these endeavors can be an antidote to a dispassionate faith, inviting young people to invest their whole selves in theological exploration.¹⁴⁶ Farmer shows how Black churches surface "the artist within" to counter youth invisibility, giving teens curatorial voice in worship, storytelling, and communal aesthetics.¹⁴⁷ The arts become catechesis: identity work, prophetic speech, and shared agency in one practice stream.¹⁴⁸

Congregations such as Grace Cathedral in San Francisco demonstrate how the making and sharing of art can become a central act of worship, from immersive light installations like *Grace Light* to artist residencies that invite the whole community into collaborative creation. Such communities exemplify how art-making and storytelling can become the church's liturgy, allowing for an integration of faith and life that is profoundly embodied.

Social Entrepreneurship Incubators

Several faith communities and nonprofits now use incubator-style programs, where young people identify local challenges, such as food insecurity or environmental stewardship, and rapidly prototype solutions through design-thinking cycles connected to theology. These initiatives pair hands-on project work with group reflection on vocation and justice. Lief and Rietema provide one empirical account of such an incubator, documenting how young people designed pop-up food co-ops and environmental stewardship campaigns while integrating prayer and scriptural study.¹⁴⁹ Another example from the Rio Grande Valley affirms the potential of this approach.¹⁵⁰

144 Scott L. Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (Jossey-Bass, 2007); Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *The Other Eighty Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

145 Ana María Pineda, R.S.M., "Imágenes de Dios en el Camino: Retablos, Ex-Votos, Milagritos, and Murals," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 364–379.

146 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Eerdmans, 2004).

147 Sarah France Farmer, "Responding to Black Youth Invisibility: The Black Church Nurturing the Artist Within," in *Religion, Culture and Spirituality in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. William Ackah, Jualynne Dodson, and R. Drew Smith (Routledge, 2017), 173–186.

148 Efre Smith and Phil Jackson. *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture*. (InterVarsity Press, 2005).

149 Jason Lief and Kurt Rietema, *To Mend the World: A New Vision for Youth Ministry* (Fortress Press, 2023).

150 Elizabeth Le'anani Coffee, "A Campus Ministry Opens a Pay-As-You-Can Deli Just as the Pandemic Hits," *Faith & Leadership*, May 12, 2020, <https://faithandleadership.com/campus-ministry-opens-pay-you-can-deli-just->

Situating social entrepreneurship alongside other faith-formation engines, incubators demonstrate how catalytic action and reflective practice can converge, equipping young people to address concrete needs while discerning their vocational callings.

The Enduring Value of Traditional Programs

Finally, it is crucial to note that many traditional, program-based models remain highly effective. In an era where many have critiqued the theological vacuity of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,”¹⁵¹ structured catechesis, Sunday School, and denominational programs offer a sound counter-narrative. Pedagogical frameworks like Thomas Groome’s “Shared Christian Praxis” provide a rigorous, structured approach to faith education that is not dependent on informal relationships but on a disciplined cycle of reflection and action.¹⁵² While sometimes critiqued for a lack of dynamism, the intellectual and spiritual discipline they require is seen by many communities as a serious and invaluable investment in forming theologically articulate disciples.

Critical Reflections

This section reveals a vibrant and diverse ministry ecosystem. Immersive events create catalytic moments. Digital ministries provide sanctuary. Megachurch models blend energy with intimacy. Justice work provides a tangible expression of belief. Arts collectives foster embodied passion. Traditional programs build a durable foundation of knowledge.

An honest assessment requires moving beyond loyalty to a single method and toward a posture of discernment. The most effective ministry leaders remain attentive not only to what works but *why* it works, interrogating the underlying mechanisms that awaken a longing for God, nurture resilience, and inspire ethical action.

Questions We Still Have:

- What theological and pedagogical criteria beyond attendance or enthusiasm can help communities assess the long-term spiritual fruitfulness of these diverse models?
- How can insights from theories of liminality or shared praxis inform the design of hybrid models that intentionally link catalytic events with sustained formation?
- How do we prevent programmatic models from becoming rigid and lifeless, while also preventing relational models from becoming theologically vacuous and devoid of discipleship’s costs?

3.3: Relational Discipleship from the Margins: Core Contributions of Underrepresented Voices

Questions We Started With:

- Whose voices have historically shaped the youth ministry narrative?

[the-pandemic-hits](#); Patton Dodd, “A Campus Ministry on the U.S.–Mexico Border Trains Young Christians to Lead,” *Faith & Leadership*, April 16, 2019, <https://faithandleadership.com/campus-ministry-the-us-mexico-border-trains-young-christians-lead>.

¹⁵¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

¹⁵² Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (HarperCollins, 1991).

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- What wisdom might marginalized communities offer about relational discipleship, both its promise and its pitfalls?
- How might youth ministry, and the broader church, be transformed if the perspectives of communities long silenced, overlooked, or misunderstood were centered at every level?

Introduction

Despite its transformational aims, the field of youth ministry in the U.S. remains shaped most profoundly by scholarship, funding streams, and practices rooted in white, middle-class contexts. This reality has produced models and methodologies that frequently reflect a narrow set of concerns—those of suburban, predominantly able-bodied, heteronormative nuclear families—rather than the full social, historical, and theological complexity found within the wider church. As practical theologians such as Willie James Jennings and Kenda Creasy Dean have observed, purportedly universal narratives about relational discipleship risk reinscribing dominance unless they are self-consciously interrupted and reimagined through the lenses of race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, culture, and place.¹⁵³

The American church's capacity to imagine new models, build resilient communities, and bear collective witness to the Gospel's liberating power now depends on reckoning with and rectifying this historic narrowing of the field's lens. It is not enough to periodically "spotlight" missing perspectives. True scholarship and faithful practice demand a deeper excavation of who has been excluded, understanding the losses that have resulted, and mapping pathways to a more just and theologically generative future.

This section does not aim to diminish the genuine contributions of white-majority models, but rather to widen the lens so that long-marginalized wisdom can be further seen as generative and formative, not just "contextual" or derivative. Only by bringing these voices into the center can relational ministry become more faithful, resilient, and responsive. While the sections above have endeavored to tell that story in an integrated way, it is useful to pause here and consider these voices on their own.

Grounding the Analysis: Critical Frameworks

In this context, *negative case analysis* draws its critical power from frameworks such as intersectionality, liberation theology, and practices of lament and reconciliation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality underscores how race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class are not merely additive but mutually constitutive and deeply entangled in shaping exclusion and thus must be explicitly named and interrogated as a central part of youth ministry research and practice (Crenshaw 1991).

Similarly, theologians such as James Cone and Natalia Córdova invite us to read ministry from "the underside of history," centering the lived experiences and spiritual contributions of those historically marginalized by church and society,¹⁵⁴ and Emanuel Katongole and Chris Rice's discipline of reconciliation lament calls white-majority congregations to move beyond

¹⁵³ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. (Yale University Press, 2010); Creasy. *Almost Christian*.

¹⁵⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Rev. ed., Orbis Books, 1997); Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present*. (Orbis Books, 2018).

acknowledging exclusion toward communal practices of grief, solidarity, and restorative action, thus positioning lament as both diagnosis and reparative practice.¹⁵⁵ While these works are not about youth ministry specifically, they are indicative of a body of work that is often missing when youth ministry is researched, written and discussed.

Decolonizing Approaches

One way of conceptualizing this approach, though it does not exhaustively provide what is missing, is decolonization. Decolonial and postcolonial theologians challenge ministry fields to recognize and dismantle the ongoing impacts of colonial imagination, its patterns of cultural dominance, erasure, and imposed theological universalism, within church life and Christian formation.¹⁵⁶ It is important to understand decolonization not simply as including non-Western bodies or celebrating “diversity,” but as a fundamental recentering of epistemologies, practices, and power structures so that the lived experience, wisdom, and agency of those marked by colonial violence become formative for the whole.¹⁵⁷ A decolonial lens insists that “fruitfulness” cannot be measured only in retention or assimilation, but in the flourishing of cultural identity, resilience, and justice-oriented discipleship.

While explicit academic treatments of decolonizing youth ministry are still sparse in U.S. scholarship, important critical principles and questions have emerged both in practice as a lived experience and in parallel disciplines, especially among African, diasporic, and Indigenous religious educators. Shantelle Weber and others writing in African contexts argue that many imported models of youth ministry replicate Eurocentric theologies and pedagogies, often neglecting the languages, symbols, histories, and social structures essential to local youth flourishing.¹⁵⁸ Decolonizing, in this frame, is not merely “contextualizing” Western models but interrogating whose interests have shaped curricula, which voices are authorized as normative, and what cultural knowledge, storytelling, ritual, context, or practice is treated as “official” versus supplementary or irrelevant.¹⁵⁹

Decolonial theory also critiques how Christian education can reproduce narratives of “saving” marginalized youth through assimilation rather than honoring their unique histories, values, and forms of resistance.¹⁶⁰ In the U.S. context, this calls for critical attention to the histories of Indigenous boarding schools, settler colonialism, forced acculturation, and the silencing of Black, Brown, AAPI, and Indigenous youth cultures within ministry settings.¹⁶¹ To “decolonize” young people, ministry might mean centering oral traditions, land-based wisdom,

¹⁵⁵ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing*. (InterVarsity Press, 2008).

¹⁵⁶ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

¹⁵⁷ Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Orbis Books, 1996); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, (2012). “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40; Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, *Unraveling Religious Leadership: Power, Authority, and Decoloniality* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2024).

¹⁵⁸ Shantelle Weber, “A (South) African Voice on Youth Ministry Research,” *Practical Theology in South Africa* 30, no. 1, 151–172.

¹⁵⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Orbis Books, 2009).

¹⁶⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed. (Orbis Books, 1988); James H. Cone, (1970). *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Lippincott, 1970).

¹⁶¹ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

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multigenerational community, and practices of lament, as well as re-examining the very structures of curriculum, leadership, and spiritual formation.¹⁶²

Applying a decolonial lens also requires U.S. youth ministry practitioners and scholars to ask: Who determines what is “best practice”? Which Christianities are authorized as normative? How do dominant metaphors, practices, and even ministry funding systems perpetuate unequal power?¹⁶³ How might youth ministry look different if led by those most shaped by colonial violence and its aftermath, and how could these ministries equip young people to become agents of repair and renewal, both within and beyond church walls?

Although decolonizing youth ministry in the U.S. remains largely an unfinished scholarly project, there is an urgent need to resource local leaders, encourage theological experimentation, and form new coalitions with postcolonial and Indigenous thinkers. The reality is that decolonization is already being lived by many marginalized youth and their communities. The task for the wider field is to listen, follow, and redistribute power so these practices help to set the broader agenda as well. Only by moving in this direction can youth ministry become a space of genuine solidarity, healing, and emancipatory possibility.

Whose Wisdom Has Been Missing from Dominant Narratives?

Before naming whose wisdom has been missing, it is important to note that no community or tradition is a monolith; within any label, there are significant differences in theology, denomination, region, language, class, migration histories, gender and sexuality, and ability. Even with that in view, the scholarly record shows a consistent pattern in which entire communities are either underrepresented or represented primarily through deficit or assimilationist frames, and those representational gaps shape what questions are asked, which practices are funded and taught, and whose theological insights are treated as normative. The discussion that follows attends to these field-level patterns not as a comprehensive list but to highlight *some* places where more inclusive scholarship would help advance the cause of relational ministry approaches.¹⁶⁴

Scholars like Almeda Wright have specifically highlighted the shortcomings of dominant youth ministry models in addressing the lived experiences and theological perspectives of young Black people.¹⁶⁵ Wright argues that without recognizing young people as theologians whose spiritual insights emerge directly from their lived struggles, ministries risk perpetuating rather than addressing systems of marginalization. Ansel Augustine’s commissioned essay further highlights

¹⁶² Katongole and Rice, *Reconciling All Things*.

¹⁶³ Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

¹⁶⁴ As we seek to recover and elevate the wisdom of historically marginalized communities, it is important to name a real asymmetry in the scholarly record. Dominant paradigms in youth ministry have received sustained academic attention, including decades of robust critique. By contrast, ministries rooted in Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, Asian American, and other marginalized traditions have often been excluded from research altogether. As a result, when we draw from these traditions, we do so primarily in a restorative and constructive mode, with far less published critical engagement available. While this imbalance reflects systemic erasure, it also creates a temptation to romanticize what has been underexamined. Our goal is not to idealize any tradition, but to take all contributions seriously as theological, pastoral, and practical resources worthy of both celebration and critical reflection. A field that aspires to mutuality must also develop the courage to examine every model with both gratitude and rigor.

¹⁶⁵ Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*.

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how systemic racism and marginalization within broader church structures continue to necessitate distinct relational strategies within Black Catholic youth ministry, emphasizing communal resilience and systemic advocacy as essential components of relational discipleship.¹⁶⁶

Richelle White's commissioned essay similarly emphasizes the importance of Afrocentric rites of passage, mentorship, and culturally affirming practices in Black youth ministry. She writes, "Black youth benefit from a relational ministry model that keeps it real... an engaged form of Christian youth ministry that intentionally brings to the center the 'real' life experiences and concerns of young people."¹⁶⁷ In this same vein, Wimberly and Farmer show how hope-work counters deficit narratives and equips young Black people to act as theological contributors inside and beyond the congregation.¹⁶⁸

The Black church, with roots in the survival practices forged amid enslavement, segregation, and struggle, offers a centuries-deep template for relational discipleship marked by intergenerational mentorship, prophetic spiritual formation, ritual storytelling, and collective care. Within Black congregational life, mentorship by "church mothers" and "church fathers," spiritual "parenting" by elders, and formative rites like testimony and communal lament are not add-ons but primary engines of belonging and faith. These patterns have cultivated agency, vocational clarity, and collective resilience in the face of persistent structural violence. Yet, even in current youth ministry literature, these core practices remain under-examined, often reduced to anecdotes or footnotes rather than being treated as central sources of practical-theological insight.

Hispanic/Latino/a traditions, similarly underrepresented, sustain complex relationships of belonging through sacramental life, intergenerational reciprocity, bilingual worship, and kinship networks that privilege the authority of abuelos and godparents, even as young people navigate bicultural tensions. The ancestral wisdom, embedded in rituals such as quinceañeras, Las Posadas, Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrations, testimonios, revival worship, large scale prayer events and other processions, intertwines identity, resistance, and communal flourishing that is not easily mapped onto predominant programmatic logic or activities.¹⁶⁹ These activities lean deeply into music, dancing, food, shared histories and testimonies in ways that build and reinforce both cultural and religious belonging.¹⁷⁰

Hispanic/Latino/a youth ministries have historically emphasized communal solidarity, cultural identity, bivocational ministry and prophetic witness, often forming alternative spaces within predominantly white ecclesial structures to affirm cultural traditions and language.¹⁷¹ These have

¹⁶⁶ Augustine, *Recreating Our Sacred Safe Spaces*.

¹⁶⁷ White, *Keeping It Real*.

¹⁶⁸ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Sarah Frances Farmer, *Raising Hope: Four Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth* (Wesley's Foundry Books, 2017).

¹⁶⁹ Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Andrés I. Pérez y Mena, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Religions, Hispanic American Religious Cultures*. (ABC-CLIO, 2010).

¹⁷⁰ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Hispanic Bible Institutes: A Community of Theological Construction*. (William Carey International University Press, 2004); Gerardo Martí, *Worship Across the Racial Divide: Religious Music and the Multiracial Congregation* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷¹ Fernando Arzol Jr., *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context*. (IVP Academic, 2008); Meredith B. McGuire, "3 Popular Religious Expressions Today: U.S. Latinos and Latinas," *Lived*

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been underexplored by scholars and promise not only application to support Hispanic/Latino/a ministry, but core lessons that might support relational approaches for all.¹⁷²

AAPY youth ministries have navigated complexities around assimilation and cultural preservation, developing unique approaches that blend traditional heritage with spiritual formation in immigrant and second-generation contexts.¹⁷³ They knit bilingual worship, intergenerational mentor networks, and leadership pathways that respect filial piety and foster youth agency. Many also address identity pressures such as model-minority expectations, racialization, and the burden of moving between home and school cultures, through testimony, small-group reflection, and justice-oriented service that ties discipleship to ethnic belonging.¹⁷⁴ The relational strategies developed in these spaces are often misunderstood when read through individualist Western paradigms, missing the strengths and challenges that arise where collectivism, hierarchy, and inter-experience dialogue meet.

Multicultural youth ministries offer a relational approach shaped by the intentional crossing of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic lines. As Tony Gryskiewicz notes, ministering beyond one's own cultural frame demands humility, deep listening, and the willingness to decenter dominant norms.¹⁷⁵ Hampton and Kiesling highlight the need to equip emerging leaders with cross-cultural communication skills and theological flexibility, while Davis applies these principles to "urban dispersed" youth who navigate cultural identities in suburban contexts.¹⁷⁶ Parrett frames this as "real-world" ministry that is essential to serving today's young people while Mayward calls for pedagogy that affirms complex identities rather than pushing assimilation. These perspectives underscore that in multicultural settings, relationship-building is inseparable from cultural identity formation.¹⁷⁷

When nurtured with intentionality, multicultural youth ministries become microcosms of the reconciling body of Christ, where difference is embraced as a gift to steward. Practices like

Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life (Oxford University Press, 2008; online ed., Oxford Academic, October 3, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172621.003.0003>; Pimentel, *Engaging with New Generations*.

¹⁷² For example, see Vincent Olea's *But I Don't Speak Spanish: A Narrative Approach to Ministry with Young People* (Paulist Press, 2019) about how a narrative methodology or story sharing gives voice to the presence of God in young people's lives, or *la cotidiano*.

¹⁷³ Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (Rutgers University Press, 2010); Lee, *Youth Ministry Curriculum Developing Korean American Youth's Christ-Centered Identity*.

¹⁷⁴ Hong, *The History of AAPY Youth Ministry*.

¹⁷⁵ Tony Gryskiewicz, *More than Pizza: Youth Ministry Beyond Our Culture and Ethnicity* (pub. by author, 2018).

¹⁷⁶ Jennifer Hampton and Chris Kiesling, "Preparing Students to Lead Faith Communities in an Increasingly Multicultural World," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 22, no. 2 (2024); Ebonie Davis, "Urban Dispersed: Applying the Principles of Multicultural Youth Ministry to Urban Teens Living in Suburban Communities," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 22, no. 2 (2024) 39–62.

¹⁷⁷ Garry A. Parrett, "Ministering in the Real World: A Multicultural Perspective on Youth Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 3, no. 2 (1999): 31; Hampton and Kiesling, "Preparing Students to Lead Faith Communities;" Joel Mayward, "Mixed Messages: Reflections on Multiethnic Identity and Narratives in Youth Ministry Pedagogy," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 1, no. aop (2024): 1–17; Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church, "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment, Preparatory Document," 15th Ordinary General Assembly, January 13, 2017, Vatican. fallriverdiocese.org+15.

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shared leadership, intercultural worship, and storytelling create spaces for young people to articulate and integrate their cultural and faith identities. Such ministries not only address representation gaps but also generate tested relational frameworks that can strengthen discipleship across the church. Their wisdom offers the broader field of youth ministry practical models for forming leaders who are culturally fluent and theologically grounded.

Additionally, neurodiverse youth and those with visible or invisible disabilities have, until recently, been almost wholly sidelined in both literature and leadership. As Raffety's comprehensive review of ministry-with-disabled-youth scholarship shows, the field has historically centered on the perspectives of parents, caregivers, and practitioners. At the same time, the direct voices of disabled youth, particularly those with higher support needs, are largely absent from research and theological reflection.¹⁷⁸ Even in empirical studies, most disabled youth are treated as research subjects rather than as co-researchers, leaders, or theological interlocutors. This absence reinforces what researchers in this area have long noted: young people with disabilities are too often positioned as "objects of ministry"—recipients of care or inclusion—rather than as participants who shape the theological imagination and communal life of the church.¹⁷⁹

Where disability is engaged more fully, Raffety identifies a marked shift in both theological vision and practical ministry. A growing body of literature, especially between 2018 and 2023, critiques the developmentalist and deficit-based models that have underwritten much youth ministry, exposing how these paradigms simultaneously marginalize young people and exclude disabled youth by framing them as perpetually "behind."¹⁸⁰ In their place, scholars and practitioners are advancing approaches rooted in critical disability studies, neurodiversity paradigms, and disability justice.¹⁸¹ These approaches emphasize the gifts, leadership, and spiritual insight of disabled youth, recognizing them as theologians, prophets, and co-creators of ecclesial culture. When disabled youth lead worship, frame theological questions, or embody new forms of prayer and friendship, ministries discover expansive understandings of belonging, the Imago Dei, and the means of grace that enrich the whole congregation.

Raffety's review also underscores that such transformations are not merely the result of theological goodwill but of intentional methodological and ecclesial shifts. Recent studies using participatory and embodied research methods, such as photovoice, narrative collaboration, and communal discernment, demonstrate that when disabled youth are invited to speak and lead on their own terms, the church's practices of prayer, relationship, and worship are radically broadened. These innovations challenge congregations to reimagine who belongs in leadership

¹⁷⁸ Raffety, *Ministry with Disabled Youth*.

¹⁷⁹ Forbes and Raffety, *Ministry with disabled youth*.

¹⁸⁰ Amy Jacober, "From Experience to Ethics: The Shaping Impact of Narrative on Youth Ministry and Disability," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, 4 (2018): 468–487; Amy Jacober, 2026. "Slow and Steady: The Still-in-Process Growth of the Intersectionality of Theology, Adolescence, and Disability" in *Ministry with Disabled Youth*, ed. Justin Forbes and Erin Raffety (Eerdmans, Forthcoming).

¹⁸¹ Wesley W. Ellis, "Diagnosing Adolescence: From Curing Adolescents to Caring for Young People," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 22, 4 (2018): 390–407; Wesley W. Ellis and Michael D. Langford, *Embodying Youth: Exploring Youth Ministry and Disability* (Routledge, 2020).

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and how leadership is exercised, how worship is structured, and how the Spirit moves through the diverse embodiments and expressions of all God's people.¹⁸²

For true inclusion, the field must also confront the deep wounds and unrealized potential linked to LGBTQ+ exclusion, particularly for those who experience both sexual/gender and racial marginalization. Research has consistently shown that young LGBTQ+ people, especially those who also belong to other marginalized communities (e.g., Black, Latino/a, Indigenous), face disproportionate rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation when faith communities convey or enact exclusionary stances.¹⁸³ These harms are compounded when young people navigate intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, leaving them vulnerable to isolation from their peers and from spiritual traditions that might otherwise serve as sources of resilience and identity. Ministries that fail to address these lived experiences directly risk perpetuating trauma, even when they claim to “welcome all.”¹⁸⁴

Yet empirical and theological work also points to the extraordinary pastoral, narrative, and theological creativity that emerges in communities where safety, affirmation, and belonging are intentionally cultivated.¹⁸⁵ In such spaces, leaders move beyond surface-level inclusion to practices that co-create spiritual language with young people, honor embodied expressions of identity, and nurture shared agency in shaping the community's theological imagination. Relational authenticity here is not a hollow buzzword but a lived risk, requiring leaders and young people to engage in courageous conversations, dismantle exclusionary norms, and imagine justice-oriented forms of discipleship. When these conditions are met, LGBTQ+ youth often become some of the most powerful agents of spiritual innovation, rearticulating the gospel in ways that embody radical welcome, mutual vulnerability, and the full dignity of all people.¹⁸⁶

Recent research focusing on Indigenous urban leadership further confirms this picture. Based on interviews with 81 Indigenous leaders across major U.S. cities, Dave Rahn and his team identified five relational sources—mentors, positive exemplars, family systems, community networks, and perseverance through adversity—as key to leadership formation and spiritual resilience.¹⁸⁷ These findings emphasize that Indigenous models of relational ministry are not supplemental, but foundational: grounded in communal discernment, healing, and storytelling that emerge directly from lived experiences in Indigenous urban contexts. Ministries shaped by

182 Raffety, *Ministry with Disabled Youth*.

183 Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015); Mark A. Yarhouse et al., *Listening to Sexual Minorities: A Study of Faith and Sexual Identity on Christian College Campuses* (IVP Academic, 2018).

184 Amy E. Green, Myeshia Price-Feeney, Casey Pick, and Samuel Dorison, “Self-Reported Conversion Efforts and Suicidality among US LGBTQ Youths and Young Adults, 2018,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 8 (2020): 1221–1227.

185 Arthur David Canales, “Ministry to US Catholic LGBTQ Youth: A Call for Openness and Affirmation,” *New Theology Review* 28, no. 2 (2016): 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.17688/ntr.v28i2.1149>.

186 Eric M. Rodriguez and Suzanne C. Ouellette, “Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): 333–347.

187 Dave Rahn, *Unlocking the Keys to Indigenous Urban Leadership* (Youth for Christ City Life Research, 2011), <https://www.aymeducators.org/wp-content/uploads/Unlocking-the-Keys-to-Indigenous-Urban-Leadership-by-Dave-Rahn.pdf>.

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this wisdom call the broader field to recognize relational discipleship as a practice of place-based trust, reparative memory, and generational solidarity.

Each of these communities brings a corrective and constructive theological imagination, expanding both language and practice. Their insights challenge narrow definitions of “discipleship,” “leadership,” “community,” and “success,” illuminating the ways God’s Spirit animates ministry well beyond the boundaries marked out by dominant frameworks.

Being under-resourced or “overlooked” is not merely a demographic fact; it shapes the lived theology of young people themselves. Immigrant and refugee churches daily navigate languages, cultures, and economies in flux. Here, youth ministry often operates as a site of mutual aid, language brokering, intergenerational negotiation, and diasporic spiritual imagination. The adaptive strategies found in these congregations remind the wider field that “success” cannot be charted on assimilative or standardized metrics alone. Yet, despite demographic shifts making these ministries vital centers of Christian life in the U.S., their voices remain marginal in core academic texts and conference stages.

Inclusion as Accountability: Toward Genuine Transformation

True inclusion in youth ministry, therefore, is not about demographic parity, surface hospitality, or raising up occasional “diverse” exemplars. It is, rather, an act of theological and institutional accountability, requiring a shift in who names the questions, who sets the criteria for success, who interprets the data, and who writes the future history of the field.

This shift demands sustained institutional and cultural change. Academic gatekeeping, funding inequities, and structural barriers must be intentionally dismantled. This means investing in Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, AAPI, immigrant, disabled, neurodiverse, rural, LGBTQ+, and under-resourced scholars, leaders, and research projects as a basic requirement for quality scholarship and faithful ministry. Patterns of listening, resourcing, and decision-making must move beyond consultation or feedback toward genuine co-creation and shared power. Churches, seminaries, publishers, and networks have a responsibility to practice reparative justice in their priorities, policies, writing, leadership formation, and resourcing.

Practically, this means normalizing the presence and leadership of underrepresented voices in every layer of ministry: making sure Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, and AAPI youth workers and theologians participate as lead authors, keynote speakers, editors, and faculty; integrating non-English languages and cultural practices into formative worship; designing programming and evaluation in partnership with immigrant, neurodiverse, and LGBTQ+ youth and their caregivers; and insisting that gatekeeping mechanisms in publishing, research, and credentialing be transparent and accountable for bias.

What Changes When Marginalized Voices Are Centered?

When full inclusion is realized, new possibilities emerge for the entire church. Pedagogies become more dialogical and story-rich, centering practices of testimony, lament, celebration, and critical consciousness; leadership emerges in decentralized, collaborative patterns that reflect the distributed wisdom and gifts of diverse participants; worship expands to include multisensory, bilingual, and embodied modes of prayer, song, and sacrament; advocacy for justice becomes

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recognized as part of the church's core identity, not just its outreach. The theological imagination of the field is thereby expanded and more deeply rooted in the lived experiences and hopes of God's whole people.

The vitality, resilience, and missional edge of U.S. youth ministry in the current generation will rise or fall on its capacity to recognize that what it most often labels "alternative" or "minority" wisdom is, in fact, foundational streams of discipleship, offering the field its most indispensable models for the future.. Honesty about the field's historic failures to listen deeply must catalyze new commitments to humility, redistribution, and principled collaboration, in research, resourcing, and the daily life of congregations. Only in this way can relational discipleship become a truly mutual, liberative, and generative reality for every young person and the communities that love them.

Questions We Still Have:

- What concrete practices help ensure underrepresented voices genuinely shape, not just supplement, ministry culture and strategy?
- How can churches, networks, and academic programs create truly inclusive ecosystems that support the full range of diverse relational, spiritual, and cultural needs?
- What can field-wide research, networks, or funding initiatives uniquely catalyze at scale that congregations or individual leaders cannot?

3.4 Conclusion

Taken together, the explorations of "Effective Alternatives" and "Underrepresented Voices" make clear that youth ministry in the U.S. cannot flourish on relational discipleship alone, nor can it afford to overlook the wisdom born of diverse contexts. Short-term pilgrimages, digital networks, high-energy gatherings, family-centered practices, service-learning, artistic expression, social-entrepreneurship labs, and time-tested programs each illuminate distinct pathways by which young people encounter and internalize faith. Yet these models risk becoming isolated innovations unless they draw intentional connections to sustaining practices, theological reflection, and meaningful community integration.

Equally, the field's historic centering of white, suburban, and heteronormative paradigms has narrowed its vision, excluding generative insights from Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, AAPI, rural, immigrant, neurodiverse, and LGBTQ+ communities. Their practices, from intergenerational mentorship in the Black church to diasporic storytelling, land-anchored rites, and disability-affirming liturgies, offer corrective frameworks and rich resources for reimagining discipleship. To move forward, the church must shift from token inclusion toward institutional accountability, embedding marginalized voices in research design, leadership pipelines, worship life, and funding priorities.

Looking ahead, Part 4 will propose a research agenda and practical roadmap for integrating these findings. By holding together relational depth, innovative forms, and the ongoing voices of those long sidelined, the next chapter aims to chart a more expansive, equitable, and creative future for youth ministry.

Part 4: A Shared Path Forward

Section 4.1: Conclusion

The “relational turn” in youth ministry is not simply a tactical adjustment or the revival of a perennial theme. Rather, as this white paper has demonstrated, it represents a profound theological recentering that insists faith, belonging, and leadership are only cultivated through relationships marked by presence, justice, and mutuality. The research is clear: when young people are welcomed as collaborators, affirmed in their identities, and engaged in spiritually rich practices across generations and contexts, both young people and congregations experience durable, transformative growth. Yet this journey demands humility, ongoing discernment, and the courage to step into uncertain, less quantifiable spaces, where God’s Spirit continues to invite renewal.

While the evidence for prioritizing relational approaches in youth ministry is both abundant and compelling, we must take care not to elevate relationships themselves as the ultimate aim. Relationships are often the means by which faith is formed, not the object of that formation. The deepest purpose of youth ministry is not merely to create connectedness, but to help young people encounter the living Christ in ways that transform their lives and communities. For scholars and practitioners alike, this means guarding against the temptation to treat relationality as an idol. Instead, we must continue to ask how our methods, structures, and ecosystems are guiding young people toward deeper intimacy with Jesus, the One in whom all true belonging, justice, and hope are found.

Looking ahead, the future vitality of relational youth ministry will depend on creative, sustained work in at least four interlocking arenas: research and evaluation, partnerships for innovation, field-wide co-creation, and a renewed, layered approach to diversity.

First, there is an urgent need for research methodologies, dissemination, and evaluative practices that move beyond attendance numbers or programmatic retention to document what truly matters. Recent scholarship points to the necessity of developing contextually sensitive tools for tracing changes in relational depth, belonging, theological imagination, and community impact.¹⁸⁸ This might include narrative inquiry, ethnographic case studies, participatory action research, and digital mapping of relational ecosystems.

One major area underdeveloped in current research and evaluation frameworks is the wide array of ministries that center their work explicitly and obsessively on the person of Jesus. Despite their global reach and generational impact, these approaches have often fallen outside the purview of youth ministry scholars for reasons that are not fully clear. Whether due to informal structures, nonacademic language, or suspicion toward affective or testimonial expressions of faith, these ministries are too often sidelined rather than studied. Future scholarship must develop

¹⁸⁸ Tracey Lamont, “Listening to Youth and Young Adults: Insights from Developmental Psychology and Cultural Studies,” in *Transforming Ministry Formation: Insights from the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry*, ed. Ted Wapham, Marti Jewell, and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Paulist Press, 2021), 145–164.

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new metrics and methodologies that do not treat these Jesus-centered movements as peripheral or unmeasurable, but as essential expressions of the field's diversity, vitality, and spiritual core.

Critically, these methods should center on the perspectives of young people themselves, as well as those from historically marginalized communities, amplifying voices too often left on the periphery of both research and practice. One promising development in this area is the Transformational Ministry Assessment from Ministry Leadership Center and Goodfaith that focuses on ministry effectiveness through the lens of individual and communal transformations, rather than only through the lens of transactional metrics (attendance, numerical growth, etc.). It is, however, currently under development at the time of writing this white paper. More efforts like these will be needed.

The field's next breakthroughs will not come from refining old metrics, but from inventing new markers of faithfulness, resilience, and transformation, measures attentive to the slow, incarnational work of God. For example, an under-explored and under-resourced effort is the one that considers transnational networks and relationships. The ways that young people are connected across, within, and beyond nation-state borders elicit attention. A move away from transactional metrics requires a look at influences, information, and imagination across borders and in transnational relationality. Youth ministry in Latino/a and other diasporic communities reflects the transnational realities and faith conduits of lived faith south and north of created borders.

Second, practical progress will require unprecedented partnership across denominations, institutions, academic and practitioner divides, and lines of cultural and generational difference. Effective relational formation does not flourish in isolation, nor does sustained innovation happen in a vacuum. Instead, congregations, networks, seminaries, and organizations must resource and sustain common spaces where leaders share failures as generously as successes, interrogate inherited assumptions together, and engage in collective sense-making amid shifting cultural terrain. These partnerships are especially vital for supporting ministries in under-resourced or marginalized contexts, affirming and scaling homegrown innovations, and seeding leadership pipelines that truly reflect the diversity of the church. Thoughtful collaboration with digital technology and media partners will also be key to extending the relational fabric that youth ministry seeks to repair.

Third, the ongoing renewal of youth ministry depends on rigorous methodologies and institutional commitments that embody co-creation at every stage of scholarly and practical work. For researchers and theorists, this calls for participatory and collaborative approaches that position young people, families, and leaders from historically marginalized groups as co-investigators rather than passive subjects or mere beneficiaries.

Effective co-creation in this context means constituting empirical research, theory building, curricular development, and evaluative protocols with intergenerational, cross-cultural, and intersectionally diverse actors at the table from the outset. The field must move beyond traditional models of expert-driven dissemination or unilateral program design toward an epistemology of mutuality, wherein practices of belonging, leadership, and ministry are constituted dialogically and adaptively. At its most generative, co-creation becomes an ongoing,

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recursive process through which innovation is not imposed from above, but iteratively negotiated and constructed through sustained dialogue, critical reflection, and shared authority among all participants in the youth ministry ecosystem.

Fourth, and of enduring importance, is the field's responsibility to attend to diversity as both a foundational lens and a specific object of analysis. This is not diversity as a checkbox, add-on, or episodic theme, but as "diversity upon diversity," what the TENx10 Research Advisory Board identifies as the critical recognition that each young person moves through an intricate web of identities, cultures, and contexts. True inclusion must interrogate how race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, immigration status, geography, and family configurations shape faith experience, not in isolation, but in their intersection and lived dynamism.

The next wave of research and practice will need not just culturally contextual adaptations, but frameworks that allow for the simultaneous presence of multiple diversities within youth groups, families, and ministries. Embedded diversity demands attention at every layer: in the design of spiritual practices, the formation of leadership, the evaluation of flourishing, and the collaborative creation of ministry resources. It also deserves explicit, stand-alone analysis, ensuring that dominant patterns and unexamined biases are surfaced and engaged. By lifting up "diversity upon diversity" as a central commitment, youth ministry will be equipped not only to welcome every young person but also to allow them to shape and lead the church into God's richly textured new future.

The questions that remain about digital engagement, metrics for transformation, longevity amid change, integration into the wider church, and the deepest logic of diversity, among others, invite courage, experimentation, and collaborative learning. As the next decade unfolds, churches that lean into relational discipleship with humility, creativity, justice-seeking imagination, and a full embrace of "diversity upon diversity" will not only shape young people's faith journeys, they will themselves be reshaped by the gifts, questions, and callings of the rising generation.

However, perhaps it is more useful to close with an invitation to posture rather than a set of academic or theological questions. In our interview with Dr. Rogelio Paquini, we asked him what his message to today's youth would be if he could talk to all of them. He responded, "I think that the most important part of your life is who you are. Where you are and where you've been and who you will be is so unique and special. God made you with these abilities, life experiences, and challenges, and it's just as important as anybody else's experience. So you are needed here."

The journey ahead is open. Let us walk it together as co-researchers, co-learners, and partners in Christ's ongoing work of reconciliation, belonging, and hope.

Appendix

Methodology

To ground this white paper in a comprehensive and diverse body of scholarship, we pursued a multi-pronged research approach over the past year. First, Future of Faith staff conducted an extensive literature review, identifying foundational texts, recent studies, and emerging voices across denominational, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. This desk research ensured we captured both classic works in youth ministry and the latest publications addressing relational discipleship, digital faith practices, and cultural contextualization. It also helped to reveal what is missing in the current scholarship.

Second, we engaged directly with the academic community through a targeted discovery survey. We invited 98 scholars spanning practical theology, sociology of religion, digital media studies, and cultural anthropology to respond to a set of open-ended questions about seminal works, underrepresented perspectives, and emerging research gaps. Following an initial invitation, two follow-up reminders, and a final outreach, 50 scholars completed the survey. Their insights yielded scores of new source recommendations, highlighted blind spots in the existing canon, and surfaced voices and topics warranting deeper exploration.

Third, to probe pivotal areas in greater depth, we commissioned ten essays from leading specialists. Topics and authors include:

- Historical development of relational youth ministry (Kim Nollan)
- Theology of relational youth ministry (Dr. Mike King)
- Youth ministry and disability (Dr. Erin Raffety)
- Black/African American youth ministry praxis (Dr. Ansel Augustine)
- African American church youth ministry (Dr. Richelle White)
- Youth ministry training organizations (Mark Oestreicher)
- AAPI youth ministry praxis (Dr. Christine Hong)
- Youth ministry training programs (Dr. Mark Senter)

These commissioned contributions have been instrumental in clarifying key nexus points and ensuring our analysis attains both breadth and depth.

Finally, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with scholars whose work intersects with our core themes, including Drs. Rogelio Paquini, Kara Powell, Jodi Hunt, Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Lakisha Lockhart. These dialogues will further enrich our understanding of relational frameworks, methodological innovations, and the lived experiences of diverse youth contexts. The essays and interviews are cited here when relevant.¹⁸⁹

Throughout this process, the TENx10 Research Advisory Board provided substantive and strategic feedback and guidance on methodology, focus, and drafts.

¹⁸⁹ All survey respondents, essay writers, and interviewees were compensated.

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To date, our combined efforts of literature review, survey, commissioned essays, and interviews have generated over 400 individual citations. This rigorous, multi-modal methodology not only maps the current scholarly landscape but also sets a foundation for the research agenda and practical roadmap outlined in this paper.

While this white paper draws on a wide range of sources across theology, sociology, and ministry studies, we recognize that the majority of published scholarship available is produced by white scholars and majority-culture institutions. Even while many of those more recent scholars acknowledge this imbalance and attempt to account for it in various ways, it is not the same as having truly equal treatment. This imbalance reflects systemic inequities in publishing, funding, and academic gatekeeping.

We acknowledge this limitation and emphasize that many of the most generative practices of relational discipleship emerge from Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, AAPI, immigrant, disabled, and LGBTQ+ communities. Future research must intentionally expand authorship, funding, and leadership to ensure these voices shape the center of the field.

For the purposes of feasibility and theoretical focus, this white paper has primarily drawn from research and scholarship centered on youth ministry. Recognizing, however, the historic underrepresentation of many communities in that scholarship, we have at times expanded beyond the bounds of youth-specific ministry literature in order to include approaches, voices, and traditions that are too often excluded. In many of these communities, ministry with young people is not always clearly distinguished from ministry with adults, elders, or families, and when appropriate, we have drawn on those integrated cultural frameworks. This white paper, however, is not a comprehensive review of all ministry models or traditions. For a complete bibliography of sources referenced and consulted, visit www.futureoffaith.org/relationaldiscipleship.

Acknowledgements

The following people provided substantial input and expertise to help shape the content and form this white paper. We are indebted to them for their participation. Though some have been listed and credited elsewhere in this document, we wanted to present the full list to ensure our gratitude is expressed. They are listed alphabetically below, and this work would not have been possible without them.

Steven Argue, PhD
Ansel Augustine, DMin
Thomas E. Bergler, PhD
Megan Brown, PhD
Cynthia L. Cameron, PhD
Mark Cannister, EdD
Tommy Carrington, PhD
Chap Clark, PhD
Elizabeth Corrie, PhD
Kenda Creasy-Dean, PhD
David M. Csinos, PhD
Ebonie Davis
Mark DeVries
Rev. Katherine M. Douglass, PhD
Rev. Amanda Drury, PhD
Wesley W. Ellis, PhD
Sarah Farmer, PhD
Justin Forbes, PhD
Brad M. Griffin, MDiv
Rich Griffith, DMin
Valerie M. Grissom, PhD
Anthony Gyskiewicz, PhD
Jonathan Hobbs, MTS
Daniel White Hodge, PhD
Christine Hong, PhD
Jodi Hunt, PhD
Rev. Amy E Jacober, PhD
Mike King, DMin
Rev. Michael A. Kipp, DMin
Danny Kwon, PhD

Tracey Lamont, PhD
Mike Langford, PhD
Jason Lief, PhD
Rev. Lakisha R. Lockhart-Rusch, PhD
Tanita Maddox, DMin
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Rev. Elizabeth Tamez Méndez, PhD
Joyce Ann Mercer, PhD
Jake Mulder, PhD
Gord Nickerson, DMin
Kimberly Nollan, PhD
Mark Oestreicher
Theresa O’Keefe, PhD
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Rev. Emily A. Peck, ThD
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Dave Rahn, PhD
Rev. Patrick B. Reyes, Ph.D.
John Roberto, MA
Mark Senter, PhD
Michael Severe, PhD
Kevin Turner, DMin
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Laura Widstrom, PhD
Montague R. Williams, PhD
Derek Wu, PhD
Rev. Karen-Marie Yust, ThD
Henry Zonio, PhD