

Twin Calamities: Declining Churches, Struggling Young

By Skip Masback

Too many of our churches and our young are struggling. Too many of our denominations and congregations are struggling because they are failing to transmit the faith to a rising generation, and too many of our young are struggling because they lack the foundations that were traditionally supplied by communities of the faith. To paraphrase the lyrics of a great band from my “ge-ge-ge-generation,” neither the churches nor the kids are all right.

What’s crucial here is that these two dynamics, the trajectory of struggling churches and the trend of struggling youth, are related – and neither of them will be resolved until we deepen the faith, commitment, and professionalism with which we minister to our young.¹

Let me begin with an old sermon illustration chestnut. One day a constable found a body floating in the river that flowed through his little village. The discovery caused great sadness and puzzlement. When no one arrived to claim the body, the villagers dutifully donated materials to construct a coffin and conducted a funeral. It was the least they could do.

A week later, however, a villager found another body in the river, and then another, and another, and so on. After a month of this, the village was just plain worn out by all the coffin construction and funerals. So one day, the constable decided to hike upstream to see what was going on.

After following the river two miles into the foothills, the constable found a small footbridge washed out. Footprints indicated that travelers had been trying to get across the river without the bridge and had been swept away by the current. The next day the villagers trooped up the trail to construct a new footbridge and solved the problem for a generation.

If you are a minister to youth, my guess is that you have already noticed some calamities washing into your downstream village of parish life. If you haven’t yet, you certainly will discover the following: First, virtually all of our so-called mainline denominations are suffering an alarming decline in

membership, particularly among so-called Generation Xers and Millennials.² And, second, many of our churches, schools, universities, and folks who

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study or practice adolescent psychology and psychotherapy are reporting an alarming deterioration in adolescent mental health.³ As I sketch the outlines of these two calamities, see if it doesn’t become apparent that, in both instances, the “upstream footbridge” that needs to be rebuilt is a passionate and dedicated ministry with and to our youth.

Bridge Repair

We have all been bombarded with the dispiriting statistics of declining denominations and churches. Mainline Protestants are grabbing all the headlines, but thoughtful Roman Catholics and evangelicals are now puzzling over their own worrisome trends as well. These patterns seem to be accelerating among rising generations. According to a 2010 Pew Charitable Trust report, “Religion Among the Millennials”:

Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation – so called because they were born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000 – are unaf-

affiliated with any particular faith. Indeed, Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20 percent in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13 percent in the late 1970s).⁴

It must be self-evident that no denomination, no church, can prosper downstream if its ranks aren't being replenished by young adults arriving in the pews to take up the mantle of their elders. And, when we troop upstream, we find abundant evidence that one of the principal reasons there are so few young adults in the pews downstream is that we are failing to transmit the faith to our children upstream.

Failure to Launch

"The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone," write Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald Luidens. "Somehow, in the course of the past century, these churches lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith and what it requires to a succession of younger cohorts in such a way as to command their allegiance."⁵

In her 2010 book, *OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook* (Abingdon, 2010), Kenda Creasy Dean begins with a series of devastating citations:

- "Most teenagers who have spent years attending church activities [have not integrated their faith] into who they are and how they live." (George Barna, 2003).
- "Our distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth." (Christian Smith, 2004).
- "The levels of disengagement among twenty-somethings suggest that youth ministry fails too often at discipleship and faith formation." (David Kinnaman, 2006)

We all recall that Jesus commissioned his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). The upstream evidence is that we are falling short of that commission with our own children.

Let's turn to a brief downstream examination of the declining mental health and well-being of our adolescents. We have all learned that proof of correlation does not necessarily mean proof of causation. Still, there is a worrisome decline in adolescent well-

being that parallels the decline in religious affiliation and connectedness.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that all adolescents are suffering. I was in youth ministry for 21 years, and I could fill hundreds of pages with reflections on the amazing, creative, intelligent young people I was blessed to know. Every community

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has its own particular blend of the sour and sweet in adolescent health and development, challenges and suffering.

Still, the anecdotal concerns of youth ministers, teachers, and psychotherapists are confirmed by statistical surveys done regionally and nationally. As the chief of Mental Health Services at Harvard University advised,

If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function . . . and one in 10 that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student's suffering depression has doubled, [and] suicide ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled.⁶

According to the 2003 Commission on Children at Risk: "Scholars at the National Research Council in 2002 estimated that at least one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood."⁷ According to another study, about 21 percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have diagnosable mental or addictive disorders associated with at least minimum impairment.⁸

To these general statements, let me add two other statistics:

- "Studies in adults and one study in youth suggested that each successive generation since 1940 is at greater risk of developing depressive disorders and that these disorders have their onset at a younger age."⁹
- By the 1980s U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than were children who were psychiatric patients in the 1950s.¹⁰

Accompanying these diagnostic findings are observations that many of our young seem to lack a sense of higher purpose or meaning in their lives. As David White noted in one of our “Youth Ministry: Now” lectures at Yale Divinity School last year, “In 1970, [of] entering college freshman 70 percent of them could talk about their hopes for a vocation that served a common good. Less than 30 percent lacked this sense of purpose. That statistic has flipped now.” Less than 30 percent of entering college freshman can talk about their hopes for a vocation that serve a common good; more than 79 percent report a lack of this sense of purpose.¹¹

Maladaptive Culture

At the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, director Miroslav Volf has been making a similar point in the God and Human Flourishing Program. His critique describes a widespread culture that is offering our young a maladaptive account of human well-being, drifting away from the religious, philosophical, and artistic resources that previous generations had called on to equip their children to discern what

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makes life worth living. Without knowing how to discuss and answer for themselves that question, Volf asserts, our children remain ignorant of the purposes of life. They become perhaps experts in understanding and manipulating their environment but amateurs in knowing to what end they should do so.

In sum, whenever you and I go out to our village’s stream, we are likely to find another troubling missive from the Center for Disease Control washed up on our banks, another report on the sad numbers of kids suffering with aimless drift, anxiety disorders, chronic depression, thoughts of suicide, or other self-destructive behaviors. Like our proverbial villagers, we can wring our hands and exhaust ourselves coping with the consequences, or we can hike upstream to see what’s going on.

Some years ago, the National Commission on Children at Risk decided to take that upstream hike, gathering a blue-ribbon panel of professors of adolescent and pediatric psychology and psychotherapy. They concluded that the crisis in adolescent mental suffering and maladjustment was caused by raising children in an unhealthy culture characterized by diminished social connectedness. The commission

concluded that children flourish better where supported by what they called “Authoritative Communities.” How did the commission define a healthy, authoritative community? Here are the characteristics. As you read, ask yourself if you have ever seen such a community:

- It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
- It treats children as ends in themselves.
- It is warm and nurturing.
- It establishes clear boundaries and limits.
- It is defined and guided at least partly by non-specialists.
- It is multi-generational.
- It has a long-term focus.
- It encourages spiritual and religious development.
- It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
- It is philosophically oriented to the dignity of all persons and to the love of neighbor.¹³

Authoritative Solution

The National Commission is the most impressive panel I have ever seen convened on children’s issues, but am I the only one who’s thinking God could have saved them a little time and money? Through Christ, God has given us the time-tested plan for building an authoritative community. God’s name for it is “church.”

As Kenda Creasy Dean reminded us in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*:

Ancient youth like Jacob and Esau grew up at a time when questions like “Who are my people? Why am I here? What gives my life meaning and coherence?” were answered, literally, by the faith of their fathers, not by theories of ego development. Yet these questions of belonging, purpose, and ideology remain at the core of human identity; while we have learned to think of them as psychological issues, such questions have historically fallen to religion to answer, ritualized in the traditions and practices of communities that seek to embody a particular story of identity.¹⁴

We Christians profess a Christ who comes “that [we] might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We are spiritual descendants of the Paul who exhorted us to “take hold of the life that really is life” (First Timothy 6:19). We preach that a life that dies to self and rises with Christ, a life that lives out Christ’s love commandment, offers, per-

haps counter-intuitively, the most appropriate and healthy prescription for human flourishing. We have a 2,000-year heritage from our scripture and traditions for gathering our young into bodies of Christ, into youth ministries, with thick connections of love, nurture, and support.

At its best, ministry with and to youth creates the time and space for adults to walk alongside young people in deep relationship, characterized by “caritas, covenant, and community”: unconditional love and acceptance, clear and understandable commitments and boundaries, and participation in something larger than themselves. When we are true to our calling – when we strive to reach out to all of our kids who are suffering, afflicted, or struggling for their faith – when we embrace *all* our kids with unconditional love and acceptance, the beauty and joy that result can be astonishing.

More Than Crumbs

But the resources and prescriptions of our faith are not self-executing. It is magical thinking to believe that we can throw a few crumbs from the church budget table, underpay a revolving-door cast of rookie youth ministers, and trust that a few mumbled prayers will convert pizza, games, and mission trips into either a body of Christ or an authoritative community.

More than 100 years ago, G. Stanley Hall coined the term “adolescence,” arguing that it was a “golden stage” when life glistens and crackles – a “vernal season of the heart” uniquely open to experiencing and sharing joy and love and uniquely susceptible to suffering their absence.¹⁵ Erik Erikson saw that adolescence was “a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution; for youth selectively offers its loyalties and energies to the conservation of that which feels true to them and to the correction or destruction of that which has lost its regenerative significance.”¹⁶

When the church ministers to its youth with passion, commitment, and professionalism, it provides the nurture they require for human flourishing and reaps the fruits of their regenerative energies. When we do not – because we’ve set other priorities, or don’t mobilize the resources, or undervalue the importance of these ministries – we set a stumbling block before our children. As we have seen, the consequences of this neglect are calamitous for both the churches and the children that we know and love.

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Notes

- 1 See a fuller version of this article, with complete references, at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture website at <http://faith.yale.edu/>.
- 2 See Pew Research Center’s 2010 study, “Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials>. See also Barna Group, “Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials,” posted May 9, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/612-three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials#.UnaZjZHnISV>.
- 3 Sherry Benton, et al., “Changes in Counseling Center Client Problems Across 13 Years,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1-2, 66-72. They examined studies involving 13,257 student-clients who sought counseling at a large midwestern university between 1988-2001.
- 4 Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, “Religion Among the Millennials,” Feb. 17, 2010, www.pewforum.org.
- 5 Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge and Donald A. Luidens, “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline,” *First Things*, March 1993, p. 18.
- 6 Richard Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 1.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Rena D. Harold, Lisa G. Colarossi, and Lucy R. Mercier, *Smooth Sailing or Stormy Waters? Family Transitions and Their Implications for Practice and Policy* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007), p. 8.
- 9 Boris Birmaher, M.D., and David Brent, M.D., “Practice Parameter for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Depressive Disorders,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 46 (11), November 2007, p. 1427. The World Health Organization corroborates cause for concern: “Recent studies have identified mental health problems, in particular depression, as the largest cause of the burden of disease among young people.” World Health Organization, “Adolescent Health Epidemiology” (2012), Department of

Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health.
www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/
adolescence/mental_health/en/.

- 10 Jean M. Twenge, "The Age of Anxiety? Birth Cohort Change in Anxiety and Neuroticism, 1952-1993," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000), p. 1007.
Also: "Childhood and adolescence is the core risk phase for the development of anxiety symptoms and syndromes, ranging from transient mild symptoms to full-blown anxiety disorders," according to Beesdo, Katja, Knappe, and Pine, "Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents: Developmental Issues and Implications for DSM-V." *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, (September 2009), vol. 32, issue 3, p. 483.
- 11 David F. White, "Practicing a Theology of Youth, Spirit and Vocation," <http://new.livestream.com/yaledivinityschool/YMI>.
- 12 As horrifying as these reports of depression and suicide are, our anecdotal experience confirms them. Extraordinary numbers of the young people in the youth groups I served were on anti-depressants at one point or another in high school. Three members of the 1999 New Canaan High School graduating class committed suicides within five years of graduation. Five Wellesley Village High School students committed suicides in a span of just four years. In my last full year serving a church, I was called upon to intervene in four adolescent suicide attempts.
- 13 Compare findings and prescription in Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (G.P. Putnan's Sons, 1996). When Pipher went upstream, she found a widespread breakdown of family and communal connectedness. She suggested we emulate the Lakota Sioux. The Sioux have a concept of community they call *Tiospaye*. The *Tiospaye* connects its members unconditionally, protects them from adversity, and teaches the stories and values of the tribe.
- 14 Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, 2010), p. 8.
- 15 G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, Vol. 2 (Appleton, 1921), p. 142.
- 16 Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (Norton, 1964), p. 126.

I was
relieved
to find
a church
a few
years ago
that
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questions
and
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Where
I could
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and
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There's
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He
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