

*Building Sustainable Ministries . . . One Church at a Time*

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## **Youth Ministry Studies (2005)**

### **Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, 2005**

**Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton**

[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

#### **The Study:**

This was the largest national study of the spiritual lives of young people ever undertaken. It consisted of both mixed methods and longitudinal data.

**Focus:** What is the character and content of the spiritual lives of American teenagers? What shapes that character and content?

#### **The Results:**

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) “It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-

Christian, individualistic, mass--consumer capitalist society.”

--Christian Smith

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. • The

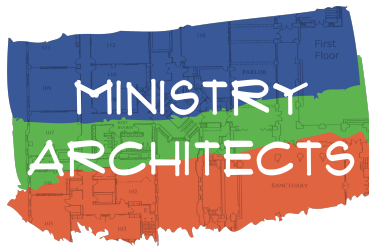
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central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die

“Parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children, even though they may not realize it.” (p. 56)

“The best general rule of thumb that parents might use to reckon their children’s most likely religious outcomes is this: ‘We’ll get what we are.’” (p. 57)

“...the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.” (p. 56)

This study also provides a look at the nature of the devoted, noted to be about 8% of the survey population.

The Devoted:

- Confess the Creed or God-Story of one’s tradition.
- Belong to a community that lives the story.
- Feel called by the story to contribute to a larger purpose.
- Have hope in the future promised by the story.

Engagement with a Christian Community:

- 8% - Devoted (weekly)
- 27% - The Regular (2-3x per month)

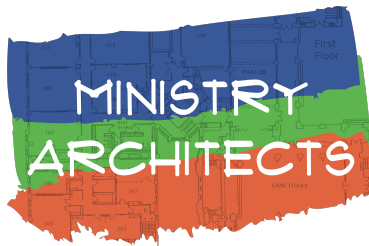
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- 17% - The Sporadic (1x per month)
- 12% - The Disengaged (3x per year)

The Devoted say: “Christianity is not something you just live. You have to practice. You can’t live it all by yourself, you need to go to church.” (Almost Christian p. 72)

“Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely:

1. to have internalized their parents religious worldview
2. to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and
3. to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously.” (Souls in Transition)

5 of 6 paths to highly religious emerging adults involve parents & parental faith.

([http://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/religious\\_trajectory\\_-\\_smith.pdf](http://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/religious_trajectory_-_smith.pdf))

## Exemplary Youth Ministry Study: 2005

[www.exemplarym.com](http://www.exemplarym.com)

### **The Study:**

A mixed methods study of youth ministry in churches from seven

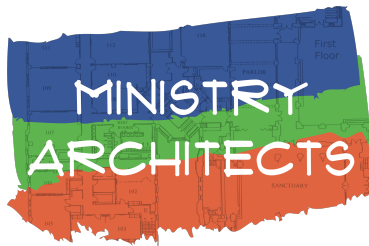
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denominations

**Focus:** What are the characteristics of congregations with exemplary youth ministries?

**Exemplary defined as:** Greater numbers of Maturing Christian Young People.

### **Maturing Christian Young People:**

- Seeks Spiritual Growth: alone and with others pursues questions, guidance and commitment through conversation, study of faith, reading the bible, prayer, small groups, and retreats.
- Possesses a Vital Faith: keenly aware of God present and active in one's own life, the lives of others, and the life of the world.
- Practices Faith: actively practices faith in Jesus Christ privately and publicly through regular attendance at worship, participation in ministry and leadership in a congregation.
- Makes the Christian Faith a Way of Life: recognizes God's "call" and integrates one's beliefs into the conversation, decisions, and actions of daily life.
- Lives a Life of Service: involved in activities caring for others and addressing injustice and immorality.
- Exercises Moral Responsibility: lives with integrity utilizing faith in making considered moral decisions.
- Possesses a Positive Spirit: reflects loving and hopeful attitudes toward others and life.

**Key Finding:** "It is the culture of the whole church that is most

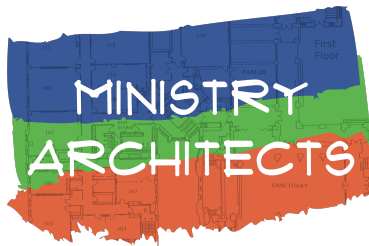
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influential in nurturing youth of vital Christian faith”

## **The Results:**

Study identified 44 Faith Assets or Practices of greatest significance:

- Theology matters: God is the subject of sentences.
- Pastoral leaders are fully engaged in ministry with adolescents.
- Youth ministry is practiced at the center of congregational life.

## **Outcomes:**

Qualities, Practices and Cultures of Congregations Establishing Vital Faith in Youth and Young Adults were reported in 44 Faith Assets.

Of the 44:

- 22 Congregational Assets
- 5 youth ministry assets;
- 15 leadership assets;
- 5 family assets

Three Faith Assets focus on life within the family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life. Two of the Faith Assets describe the role of the congregation in equipping and support parents and family life.

Adult leaders who serve for longer periods of time seem to be an

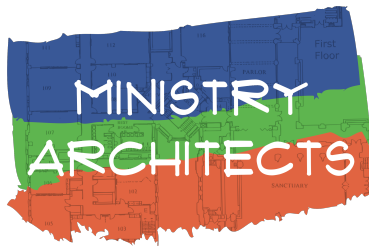
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important positive factor in the faith maturity of youth. Longevity among leaders is a vision to be stated and nurtured.

Congregations build an environment in which youth ministry is valued and long-term youth ministry leadership a calling. (Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry, 213)

People who live lives of service, justice, and advocacy often point to early experiences in their family as being normative. (p.175).

Ministry Architects would like to thank Dr. Nancy S. Going at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. She gathered valuable data from almost 30 years of youth ministry statistical studies. Thank you Dr. Going for making this available to youth workers.

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