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## A Practical Theology of Adolescent Discipleship: Integrating Developmental Science and Theology to Guide Congregational Ministry

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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT DISCIPLESHIP:  
INTEGRATING DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY TO GUIDE  
CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

Written by

WILLIAM HASLIM

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary  
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:



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Chap Clark



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A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT DISCIPLESHIP:  
INTEGRATING DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY TO GUIDE  
CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

WILLIAM HASLIM  
NOVEMBER 2019

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## ABSTRACT

### **A Practical Theology of Adolescent Discipleship: Integrating Developmental Science and Theology to Guide Congregational Ministry**

William Haslim

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2019

This project was developed to help Community Presbyterian Church of Danville, California, establish a more holistic and formative approach to adolescent discipleship by focusing on the developmental needs of young people and leveraging greater congregational support to address those needs. A practical theology of adolescent discipleships was built around both biblical mandates and insights from the developmental sciences. The integration of these perspectives offered greater clarity on adolescence as a crucial context for ministry. The alignment between the normative developmental tasks of adolescence and the formative directives for discipleship found in Scripture illuminated those aspects of personal and spiritual formation that must become the focus of adolescent discipleship.

Research revealing the levels of social support adolescents need to thrive in these developmental processes indicate that effective ministry with teens requires the engagement of not just those serving in the church's student ministries department but the engagement of the congregation as a whole. To facilitate that broader engagement, an ecclesiology focused on the biblical metaphors of family and adoption has been proposed as a means to shape a church culture that prioritizes active efforts to welcome adolescents into the life of the church.

This project initiated an array of strategies at Community Presbyterian Church designed to strengthen the church's approach to adolescent discipleship in ways that take seriously the developmental needs of adolescents and the biblical mandate for the whole church to share in the responsibility and calling to embody God's adoption of younger brothers and sisters into the family of faith. These strategies, which targeted both the student ministries department and the congregation, have been successfully implemented with preliminary indications of effectiveness. However, the longer-term results have yet to be assessed, while the implementation of this praxis continues to be refined and reinforced.

Content Reader: Chap Clark, PhD

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## INTRODUCTION

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”<sup>1</sup> (Mt 9:35-38)

This passage offers more than just an overview of Jesus’s itinerant ministry. It reveals something profoundly personal about Jesus’s motives and his heart for the people he encountered. Beyond the twelve disciples, beyond those he interacted with in a personal way, and even beyond the many he had the opportunity to touch, teach, and heal, Jesus saw the crowds. He saw them, he understood their struggles and needs, and he cared deeply for them. Matthew explains in this passage that as Jesus traveled from place to place, he had compassion on the crowds of people he saw, because he saw that they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). That is in no way a demeaning statement, but rather a statement of heartfelt concern. Undoubtedly, if Jesus were traveling through the towns and villages of our world today, he would feel the same compassion for the countless crowds he would encounter. Yet, if there were one particular group of people living in our midst today that might best fit the situational description that elicited Jesus’s compassion, it would likely be our adolescents.

Adolescents in our American context today are truly harassed by countless demands and pressures coming from ever changing cultural expectations, negative peer and societal influences, excessive parental prodding, ever growing academic loads, and their own internal struggles to figure out who they are, where they belong, and whether

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<sup>1</sup> All scriptural quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New International Version.



their lives will matter. But adolescents are also experiencing a growing helplessness, both perceived and real, as they fail to find the sources of support they need to navigate their way from childhood into adulthood, and as they find themselves increasingly isolated in a world that increasingly offers the illusion and false promise of connection. In many profoundly troubling ways, teens in America today are like sheep without a shepherd.

The Church has an incredible opportunity to shepherd the adolescents in its communities, but the efforts of youth ministries in congregations across our country are coming up short of that goal. Over the past two decades there has been an increasing recognition and broadening awareness among youth ministry leaders that, collectively, American churches are simply failing to nurture a lasting discipleship among the young people in their care. Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, California, is one of those many churches that has been shaped by the influences of the American youth ministry movement over the past several decades and is likewise recognizing that its current best efforts are bringing only limited results.

Even though Community Presbyterian Church has had a long history of strong youth ministry with generous financial support, consistent staffing and programs dedicated to nurturing the spiritual formation of adolescents, and high levels of participation, there are growing concerns over the long-term effectiveness of the discipleship of its students. Many leaders in the broader community of youth ministry practitioners representing countless congregations like Community Presbyterian Church have called attention to the alarming numbers of youth who are leaving the church when they leave our youth programs. In other words, it is becoming clear that youth ministry programming that may appear successful by short-term and external measures is not

necessarily nurturing the depth of spiritual formation among adolescents that will lead them into a life of lasting discipleship grounded in the larger family of faith.

If ministry programs designed to target the spiritual needs of adolescents appear successful outwardly but fail to produce lasting results, then the shortcomings likely lie below the surface of our programming. More specifically, youth ministry that is failing to accomplish deeper results is most likely failing to address the deeper needs of adolescents. In order for ministry to have truly formative outcomes in the lives of adolescents, it must address the formative aspects of their personal and spiritual development. The work of spiritual formation needs to be intentionally integrated into the work of nurturing psychosocial development.

A more holistic and robust approach to adolescent discipleship must take seriously insights not only from biblical reflections but also from developmental psychology, neurobiological research, behavioral studies, and sociological and historical reflections. If adolescence is that period of development that brings a person into mature wholeness and prepares them for full participation in their communities, then whatever can be learned about that process itself, even from secular sources, should further reveal the Creator's intentions for this development as an intrinsic aspect of growth built into our humanity. Therefore, it should be expected that what Scripture has to say about the spiritual process of growing into maturity, wholeness, and full kingdom participation in Christ will find alignment and resonance with what science can clarify about the socio-biological process of growing into maturity, wholeness, and full communal engagement.

The purpose of this project is to develop a practical theology of adolescent discipleship that is shaped both by biblical mandates and by insights from developmental

and social sciences in the hope that together these perspectives will offer greater clarity about what is needed to nurture spiritual formation and holistic personal development in the crucial years of adolescence. Chapter 1 will explore the context of this ministry at Community Presbyterian Church, looking at its history, demographics, and cultural influences that have shaped its work with the youth of its community, and then clarify the challenges facing that ministry. Chapter 2 will explore the context of adolescence itself, assessing the opportunities and vulnerabilities of this age group. Chapters 3 through 5 will provide theological reflections on adolescent discipleship, bringing to light the alignment between the key developmental tasks of adolescence and the key formative tasks of discipleship, exploring the ways those tasks need to be supported interpersonally, and then discussing the ecclesiological changes needed to engage more of the congregation in that vital work. Chapters 6 and 7 will describe and evaluate strategic initiatives being implemented to strengthen the church's approach to adolescent discipleship and to foster deeper, more supportive connections between adolescents and the congregation as a whole.

This last aspect of building stronger, more supportive connections between adolescents and the adult segments of the church community is an important theme that comes out of much of the theological reflection of this project. The importance of providing personal, ongoing, relational support for adolescents to nurture their personal and spiritual formation is informed not only by the findings of countless studies of adolescent development but also by scriptural reflections on God's intentions for the Church.

In Matthew 9:35-38, quoted above, Jesus makes a rare request for his disciples to pray for something quite specific. As Jesus saw the crowds and was moved with compassion for them, he acknowledged the magnitude of the need, even admitting astonishingly that there was far more need around him than he could personally address. It is strange to consider that during his earthly ministry, Jesus himself saw more needs than he would be able to touch directly. The scope of the needs around Jesus was simply larger than the scope of that part of his earthly ministry. That realization might actually be somewhat comforting to those feeling overwhelmed by the work of ministering to adolescents today. However, Jesus's response was to tell his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mt 9:37-38). Those words are crucially directive for every church leader working with adolescents. The harvest is plentiful. There are countless crowds of harassed and helpless teens in our communities, wandering through adolescence like sheep without a shepherd. They are not just young people with deep hurts, struggles, and needs. They are also young people with incredible God-given gifts, abilities, and potential; people that matter deeply to Christ. Yet, if the Church can better understand the scope and depth of their needs, it will better understand the need to raise up and send more workers into their lives to offer them the love and support needed to nurture their spiritual and personal formation. The Church will better understand its shared, collective responsibility to shepherd its young people.

The goal of this project is to help Community Presbyterian Church develop a more holistic and formative approach to adolescent discipleship by focusing on the developmental needs of young people and by leveraging greater congregational support

to address those needs. There is no simple or sure way to bring about that outcome, but Jesus told his disciples to pray for it. So, it is the prayer of this author that the Lord of the Harvest will send workers into this local harvest field to provide what has been missing and to reach those for whom Jesus is still moved by compassion.

PART ONE  
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF ADOLESCENT  
DISCIPLESHIP

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CHALLENGES OF YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL AND LARGER CONTEXTS

Ministry is never easy, but ministry among adolescents might just be as hard as it gets. The work of caring for hurting people, effectively conveying the heart of the gospel message, nurturing the slow progress of spiritual transformation, and fostering real community among inherently selfish human beings—of any age—is naturally overwhelming, exhausting, and often thankless. Yet, adolescents bring a unique set of challenges and needs with them to the already demanding work of ministry. Working with adolescents means working within adolescence—a limited window of opportunity but an almost unlimited well of complex struggles.

In the relatively short time during which an adolescent moves into and through a church's youth ministry, leaders in that ministry are working within the limited access they have to that young person to establish a meaningful personal connection, to foster for him or her a genuine sense of communal belonging, to share a breadth of biblical truth (culturally translated and even tailored for the sake of their individual understanding), to support the young person through a variety of unique, personal struggles, to encourage them to respond to the invitations of Christ, to nurture their ongoing spiritual growth, and

to help them establish patterns of discipleship they will carry into adulthood, not just for them to live out personally but to live out in relationship with their church family. That list of responsibilities for youth ministry would be challenging enough in itself, but for each piece of it there are added obstacles to overcome.

Personal access to students is not limited just by the schedule of ministry gatherings and the availability of a leader to connect outside those gatherings. Adolescents are some of the busiest people in their communities with countless competing demands on their time. Generational differences create cultural barriers to establishing personal connections between adult leaders and teens, often creating an unconscious aversion before there is any chance to connect. Social group dynamics shaped by a young person's self-concept and reinforced by peer interactions (especially in school settings) often impede a sense of belonging in a youth group setting that would require young people to cross well-established social boundaries that are invisible to ministry leaders. Sharing biblical truth is made more challenging not just by short attention spans and the newly pervasive electronic distractions that young people now bring with them, but by the increasingly anti-biblical attitudes of the culture in which young people are immersed. Encouraging adolescents to respond to the invitations of Christ and supporting their spiritual growth is made all the more difficult by the heightened impulsivity and emotionality of this age group that often undermine the steps they do take and then makes them all the more susceptible to taking subsequent steps in the wrong direction. Helping adolescents establish patterns of discipleship to live out in connection to a larger church family is particularly difficult in most settings where young people rarely know anyone in the church outside the circle of its youth ministry. And



lastly, the work of supporting adolescents through the personal struggles they face in this period of life is daunting just because of the breadth of those struggles that can include issues of school performance, family strife, substance abuse, emerging distress around sexual identity, bullying, loneliness, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-injurious behaviors. All of these challenges make the work of adolescent discipleship difficult, but they are the unavoidable features of the landscape of adolescence and the normal context of youth ministry. In fact, it is the breadth of these challenges, which have always come with work of engaging teens, that have made youth ministry one of the most holistic and robust expressions of the church's mission to a particular group.

From that perspective, the personal struggles that adolescents bring with them, especially those that arise out of their developmental process itself, are not challenges added to the work of ministry with this age group. Those struggles are the very heart of this ministry. The goal is not merely to see young people safely through the perils of adolescence while offering them some things to believe about Jesus. The goal is and has always been to join Jesus in addressing those deepest struggles and nurturing the formative development that those struggles actually represent. The real challenge of adolescent discipleship is that it cannot be separated from the rest of adolescent development. To support the former, the church must provide real care for the latter.

Historically, to the degree that youth ministry has developed into a distinct department within the church and operated independently of the rest of the church, it has had to function as the entirety of the church to the young people it has served. For several decades, those churches in America that wanted to prioritize their ministry among adolescents and those that could afford to support it financially built up, staffed, and

resourced a specialized department within the church to serve as a fully programmed representation of the church to young people. In those churches that were most successful in doing so, the function of the church was so fully realized by its youth ministry that adolescents had little if any connection to the rest of the congregation and its corporate life.<sup>1</sup> This approach has been the heritage of Community Presbyterian Church in the Bay Area of Northern California, whose ministry with teens has been shaped in part by its long history in the community, the financial generosity and stability of its congregation, and its consistent prioritization and support of its youth.

### **Youth Ministry in Community Presbyterian Church's Local Context**

Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, California, or simply “CPC” as most people in the surrounding community know it, is a church with deep roots and a long history in its community. In fact, CPC traces its origin back to the organization of the very first Protestant congregation in Contra Costa County in 1851. The church's first building was constructed in 1875, then later lost in a fire and replaced in the early 1930s. That rebuilt structure still stands today as Danville's current Town Hall. The church relocated just a few blocks away in 1950 to a larger site in order to respond to the steady growth it had been experiencing. Since that move, the congregation has continued to grow steadily, expanding its campus and resources along the way. Today the church has about 1,700 in membership, 1,200 in average weekly attendance at its worship services, but actually well over 3,000 in sporadic but ongoing attenders. This longevity and general

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Cummings-Bond, “The One-Eared Mickey Mouse,” *Youthworker* 6 (Fall, 1989): 76-78.

strength of the church has positioned CPC with a substantial degree of credibility and trust within its community. And this favorable reputation has contributed in part to a generally positive perception of the church's work with young people, even among those who do not attend the church.

Throughout these past 140 years that have shaped CPC, the community surrounding it has undergone profound changes. When the church began, it was in a rural farming community on the outskirts of the Bay Area's centers of population. From the early 1900s to the 1960s the area grew modestly as it shifted from a farming community to a residential one. But it was the construction of an interstate freeway through the community in the 1960s that brought the most significant jump in the population of Danville: from about 3,500 in 1960 to over 40,000 by the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> That growth also reflected a marked increase in the desirability of this town as a place to live and raise a family.

Danville's seemingly secluded location just beyond the congestion and hustle of the Bay Area is still within convenient proximity to major centers of commerce and technology in the Bay Area. Several large companies like Chevron, PG&E, AT&T, and Safeway have established large corporate headquarters within a few miles of the town. The local public school district is also considered among the best in state. The high school located closest to the church is currently ranked 126 out of 2,185 high schools in

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<sup>2</sup> "Population of Danville, CA," Population.us, 2016, <http://population.us/ca/danville/> (accessed September 14, 2018).

California by U.S. News & World Report.<sup>3</sup> The school district, as a whole, was ranked number twenty out of 330 in the state by a website dedicated to helping people find and select schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.<sup>4</sup> Danville also recently made the news when it was ranked the number one safest city in all of California by a home security review website that looked at recent FBI data on violent crimes and property crimes.<sup>5</sup> As these kinds of factors have contributed to the increasing desirability of this area, Danville has been transformed from a modestly rural suburban community to one of the most desirable real estate markets in California. One real estate site has listed Danville's 94506 zip code as the second most expensive place to own or rent a home in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The community's median property value is \$919,500, compared to the state's median property value of \$477,500.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the community around CPC is now one distinguished by its affluence.

The current median household income in Danville is \$146,603 and its poverty rate is just 2.78 percent.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the state's median household income of \$63,783 and a

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. News and World Report, "San Ramon Valley High," U.S. News High School Rankings, [usnews.com, https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/san-ramon-valley-unified/san-ramon-valley-high-3356](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/san-ramon-valley-unified/san-ramon-valley-high-3356) (accessed September 14, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Niche, "2019 Best School Districts in California," [niche.com, inc., https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-school-districts/s/california/](https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-school-districts/s/california/) (accessed September 14, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Alexia Chianis, "California's 50 Safest Cities of 2018," October 4, 2018, [Safewise.com, https://www.safewise.com/blog/safest-cities-california/](https://www.safewise.com/blog/safest-cities-california/) (accessed October 9, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Laura Allen, Movoto Blog, "Most Expensive ZIP Codes for Housing in America," [movoto.com, August 18, 2015, https://www.movoto.com/blog/top-ten/most-expensive-housing-zip-codes/](https://www.movoto.com/blog/top-ten/most-expensive-housing-zip-codes/) (accessed September 14, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Data USA, "Danville, CA," [datausa.io, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/danville-ca/](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/danville-ca/) (accessed September 14, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

statewide poverty rate of 14.3 percent, the affluence of this community is pronounced—even within California. The homes and cars seen around town make this affluence obvious, but one of the most telling insights into the lifestyle of this community came in 2011 when a consumer research group identified Danville’s 94506 zip code as America’s single highest spending population in its per capita expenditures on clothing.<sup>9</sup>

These unique local demographics mean that the context in which CPC pursues its ministry is a community of people defined by their financial, professional, educational, and social achievement, as well as their ability to acquire what they want. That means that CPC has a well-resourced congregation readily able to invest in what it deems important and valuable. It also means that CPC has a congregation that expects certain levels of quality and professionalism in programming and demands certain levels of responsiveness to its needs and desires. These cultural factors have undeniably had a shaping influence on the church and its approach to ministry. In particular, as will be discussed below, the trend toward the specialization and professionalization of youth ministry in recent decades was one the church followed unreservedly.

These unique local demographics have also shaped the lives of young people in this community. Adolescents in Danville are growing up in a context of extremely high performance expectations. Pressures from parents and peers set the bar very high for what they achieve and how they present themselves in terms of their grades, athletic performance, extracurricular activities, personal appearance, social status, and, in

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<sup>9</sup> Pinpoint Demographics, “California Towns Top the Nation in Per Capita Spending on Clothing on Pinpoint Demographics’ 2011 List,” pr.com, <https://www.pr.com/press-release/299317> (accessed September 14, 2018).

particular, college readiness. A recent documentary addressing the unrealistic academic pressures adolescents are facing today highlighted interviews from several Danville students whose lives and experiences in this environment epitomized the concerns of its producer.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of students growing up in this community attend four-year universities after graduating high school, and as the competition for university admissions continues to increase, most students in this community (and their parents) experience this expectation as a source of pervasive stress and anxiety, beginning for some as early as middle school. The resulting stress these students experience on a daily basis, the busyness of their schedules, the priorities and values of the culture around them, and the spoken and unspoken messages they are absorbing about definitions of success all present real challenges to the work of ministry with these students. Individualism, materialism, and consumerism are unquestioned values in this community that instill attitudes and assumptions in young people that run counter to the discipleship priorities of the gospel.

Of course, the high demands on students means that their busy schedules present an obstacle to their availability to engage in the ministries of the church. But the local high cost of living and the expectation that most students will move away from the area to attend a four-year university also combine to limit the church's access to adolescents of this community in another unique but significant way. While most students move away to attend college after high school, few return. While preteens and teens in Danville makes up 16 percent of the population, the proportion of young adults in their twenties

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<sup>10</sup> "Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture" is a 2009 documentary produced and co-directed by Vicki Abeles, who created the film in part in response to the suicide of a local student who took her life when her grades fell.

drops to only 5.6 percent of the town.<sup>11</sup> The cost of living is simply prohibitive to most recent college grads being able to return to live in the area. The proportional representation of older adults increases through the groups of people in their thirties and forties as many successful professionals move to the area to raise their families here.

What that means for CPC is that it has a limited window of opportunity to minister to adolescents in its community. More specifically, it means that for the majority of students that CPC will care for, the focus of the church's efforts has to be aimed at students through their early and middle adolescence. Of course, the work that needs to be done in these students lives can in no way be complete by the time they graduate from high school. However, it may be possible for this church's investment in the discipleship of adolescents to succeed in helping them solidify a life-long commitment to following Christ if it can provide the kinds of personal support and establish the right patterns of engagement that will lead these students to continue to engage the Church for their own journey of discipleship after leaving this particular congregation. The weighty question looming over this ministry is whether its current approach and methodology is really accomplishing that goal for the majority of young people it serves. And to better understand that, it is helpful to understand how youth ministry at CPC has taken shape. As with so many other suburban Protestant churches across our country, CPC's ministry with adolescents has been influenced and shaped to a great extent by the larger cultural movement of youth ministry in America.

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<sup>11</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 Demographic Profile Data," American Fact Finder, [factfinder.census.gov](https://factfinder.census.gov), <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed September 14, 2018).

## **The Trajectory of Youth Ministry in the Broader North American Context**

Churches like CPC have not designed their approach to youth ministry or built their programs for adolescents as an isolated, independent endeavor. Quite to the contrary, leadership in youth ministry has been for decades a very interconnected, interactive, and mutually influencing segment of church leadership across America. Formal and informal networks, national conventions, regional conferences, specialized publishing groups, and online resources have contributed to establishing a widely influential culture of youth ministry marked by a spirit of collaboration as well as subtle competition and even commercialization. One of the greatest effects of this culture of youth ministry connectivity has been the homogenization of youth ministries in churches across the United States. Even where there have been instances of local innovation, these have been quickly propagated in books, seminars at national conventions, and online forums. Therefore, the history and current state of youth ministry at CPC is really a reflection of the history and current state of most of youth ministry in suburban America.

Youth ministry in its present form traces its roots back to the youth fellowship approach to working with young people that had been adopted by fourteen mainline denominations by the mid-1940s and the concurrent rise of parachurch youth ministry agencies like YoungLife and Youth for Christ.<sup>12</sup> In response to the growing subculture of teenagers in America after World War II, churches and parachurch organizations worked to gather adolescents into Christian fellowships of their peers being led and supported by

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<sup>12</sup> Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 64.



caring adults. The key difference between these two concurrent movements is that parachurch ministries primarily targeted high school campuses with an evangelistic emphasis, while church-based ministries primarily targeted the children of its members with an emphasis on discipleship. Of course, these two movements did not develop completely independently, and of particular interest is the ways that churches thoroughly attempted to duplicate the methods of Young Life's club model and Youth for Christ's Campus Life model. According to ministry historian Mark Senter, however, the greatest failing of churches that tried to duplicate these approaches was that they often borrowed the programmatic approaches but missed the core rationale behind them.<sup>13</sup> What that meant for many churches is that they often built youth ministries around programmatic club models but missed the essential role of invested adults as incarnational ministers of the gospel. It also meant that many of these churches lacked a fervent drive to reach kids outside their congregations.

Some of the transformation that helped to refocus the priorities of youth ministries in churches came from the rise of youth ministry publishers like Youth Specialties that launched in the late 1960s and Group Magazine that followed shortly after. These organizations began disseminating resources to support youth ministries across the country and gradually matured from focusing on programmatic activities to addressing the real needs of adolescents. The books, seminars, regional gatherings, national conventions, and later online resources, along with the host of recognized youth ministry experts that came out of these organizations and others like them, began to offer a

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<sup>13</sup> Senter, *When God Shows Up*, 249-250.

growing compendium of informal training for church leaders that shaped in consistent ways the ministries they led.

Beginning in the late 70s another trend that further shaped youth ministry in many churches was the professionalization of youth ministry. More and more churches began to hire part-time and then full-time youth leaders, and in response to churches wanting to hire trained professionals, a growing number of Christian colleges in the 1980s and 1990s began offering majors in youth ministry.<sup>14</sup> The two key benefits that this professionalization offered to churches was a general deepening of theological grounding of their methodologies and better training for key leaders responding to deeper struggles and concerns youth were facing. This development also pushed the programming of youth ministry to become more sophisticated and specialized. One detrimental effect of this has been a deepening distinction and separation of church based youth ministries from the activities of the rest of their congregations. Another liability of this specialization of youth ministry has been a subtle but growing abdication of responsibility for and involvement in the spiritual nurture of adolescents by leaders and congregants outside their youth ministry department and even by many parents who perhaps came to believe that discipleship was now best left to the professionals.

The model of youth ministry that took shape under these influences was a relational approach to adolescent discipleship, led by a full-time expert, supported by other paid staff or interns, and implemented by a team of adult volunteers that used an on-campus weekly program to gather students, provided fun activities, offer elements of

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<sup>14</sup> Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America*, 293.

worship and teaching, and nurture relational connections among peers and with caring, supportive adults—all as the means to engaging students with the message of the gospel and the person of Christ. Of course, there have been wide variances in how this model was implemented and experienced by teens in different churches and with different emphases of the elements. For example, a common critique of contemporary youth ministries in churches has been “the accusation that they were merely fun and games” and that “much of youth ministry has settled for nothing more than entertainment.”<sup>15</sup> Most youth workers would certainly balk at that indictment, but the drive to attract teens and retain their participation—even for deeper motives—may have in fact led many ministry leaders to misplace their energies on those elements.

This is the model of ministry that has shaped the efforts of adolescent discipleship at Community Presbyterian Church. For decades CPC has been able to have an ordained pastor overseeing its youth ministry with several other paid staff members and interns supporting those efforts. Teams of adult volunteers from the congregation have been serving faithfully on the front lines of ministry with teens for decades. The church has long had a strong evangelical passion for reaching kids, not only the children of its members, but also those outside the church in the surrounding community. Philosophically, CPC’s youth ministry has maintained a strong commitment to an incarnational approach that prioritized personal support of individual adolescents over merely mass participation. At the same time, it has tried to maintain some level of

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<sup>15</sup> Senter, *When God Shows Up*, 307.

outward excellence in its programming, in response to the undeniably consumeristic demands of teens and their parents alike.

On the whole, this model has appeared to be very successful. Throughout its history, CPC has maintained a highly-invested commitment to its ministry with youth. The church has generously and consistently provided a substantial budget and facilities to support its year-round programming, and its youth ministry leadership staff has been well supported and enjoyed long tenures. CPC's youth ministry program has always been one of the most well attended in the area. It has been generally well respected and trusted in the community, which has been evident in the responsiveness of students and parents outside the church to its two largest outreach-oriented annual events: its spring mission trip to build homes in Mexico and the high school houseboating summer camp. As leading indicators, these two annual events have grown steadily over the last fifteen years, most recently drawing 275 and 330 student participants, respectively. That level of participation is not astounding, but for the church's current sociological context in the Bay Area of Northern California and for a congregation with an average weekly worship attendance of 1,200, it is very encouraging.

### **The Contemporary Struggles to Nurture Lasting Discipleship among Adolescents**

While this approach has appeared to be working very effectively for decades, and even still appears so in many places like CPC, the church in America is in the process of waking up to the realization that its visible success in adolescent discipleship has actually been more shallow and short-lived than previously thought. The real ministry challenge that the American church is coming to recognize is that a significant portion of youth that

have been actively and enthusiastically engaged in our youth ministry programs are not continuing to engage with the church or pursue their discipleship after graduating from high school. For many churches like CPC, this shortcoming has been mostly overlooked. With a high rate of students attending college out of town and very few able to afford to return and live in the area after college, it has not been easy to track how students do in their transition from middle to late adolescence or emerging adulthood. Yet research throughout the past decade has provided new insights, and the results are discouraging.

### **Local and Broader Findings of Ineffectiveness**

Those who have been working in ministry with young people for long enough to observe recent trends agree that the task is getting harder and its impact seems to be diminishing. Chap Clark and Kara Powell, long term experts in the field of youth ministry, expressed the struggle well:

Today's kids seem tougher to reach, more distant and disconnected. Programs and events don't have the same impact they used to. Spiritual growth seems much slower and more erratic for most young disciples than even a few years ago. Even those kids who are deeply committed to Jesus Christ often seem to have gaping holes in the way they live out their faith compared to adolescent disciples of the past. Whether it's struggles with lifestyle (e.g., substance abuse or sexual behavior) or attitudes they can't seem to or even want to shake (e.g., racism or spiritual arrogance), what we call "discipleship" doesn't seem to be working like it used to.<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, a growing number of voices in recent decades have begun calling attention to concerns about the longevity of the church's engagement and impact among adolescents. It is becoming increasingly clear that even high levels of participation

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<sup>16</sup> Chap Clark and Kara Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-So-Secret Findings About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 70.

in church youth ministries among high school-aged adolescents is not in itself any indication of deep and lasting discipleship. One observer of youth ministry expressed the problem this way:

A perennial frustration of youth ministers is how to address the problem of large numbers of their faithful youth who graduate from high school and seemingly graduate from church and religious involvement... Pastors wonder why young adults who once were so active in church are now so unpredictable in church attendance and faithful service.<sup>17</sup>

A survey of more than 1,000 adults ages eighteen to thirty conducted by LifeWay Research in April and May 2007 revealed that 70 percent of young adults ages twenty-three to thirty stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between eighteen and twenty-two.<sup>18</sup> Gallop's research found a similar drop in church attendance from teens as they moved out of high school: "Fifty-four percent of teens aged 13 to 15 reported having attended church in the past seven days, as did 51% of 16- to 17-year-old teens. The figure drops to 32% among 18- to 29- year-olds."<sup>19</sup> That indicates at least a 37 percent drop in regular church participation after high school. Fuller Youth Institute's Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford concluded that "40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick with their faith in college."<sup>20</sup> Kinnaman's research confirmed this: "Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley Black, "Youth Ministry That Lasts: The Faith Journey of Young Adults," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4, no. 2 (April, 2006): 19.

<sup>18</sup> LifeWay Research, "Parents & Churches Can Help Teens Stay in Church," [lifewayresearch.com](https://lifewayresearch.com/2007/08/07/parents-churches-can-help-teens-stay-in-church/) (August 7, 2007), <https://lifewayresearch.com/2007/08/07/parents-churches-can-help-teens-stay-in-church/> (accessed September 21, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> George H. Gallop Jr., "The Religiosity Cycle" June 4, 2004, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/6124/religiosity-cycle.aspx> (accessed October 8, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 15.

between the number of teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million twentysomethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their thirtieth birthday.”<sup>21</sup> None of these studies are without flaws and none of them should be looked at in isolation. For example, at least one other study found a much smaller church drop-out rate of teens graduating from high school (less than 10 percent), but that conclusion was based on analysis of a single question in which respondents evaluated their own church participation on a four-level likert scale, within a lengthy survey addressing a wide range of topics.<sup>22</sup>

The National Survey of Youth and Religion, led by Christian Smith, is another study widely cited by many as uncovering the same decline in spiritual engagement of adolescents after high school. As with any survey, the NSYR has its shortcomings and its sampling may or may not have captured the most representative cross section of youth in America.<sup>23</sup> However, what is undeniably valuable from this study were the trajectories uncovered by the longitudinal nature of the multiple waves of this study. Of all the adolescents tracked between the first and third waves of this study (2,432 in total) Smith’s team found that over 50 percent of young people grouped into the two categories

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<sup>21</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker, “Finding Faith, Losing Faith: The Prevalence and Context of Religious Transformations During Adolescence,” *Review of Religious Research* 47, no.3 (March 2006): 217-237.

<sup>23</sup> While this survey reached over 3,000 randomly selected youth and offered both Spanish and English options, it initiated contact by home telephone and required a parent to be present. Youth that are reachable by home telephone and have a parent present do not represent the diverse spectrum of teens in America.

of most religiously committed declined significantly in their religious commitments during the five years following the first study.<sup>24</sup>

What has become clear from all these studies taken together is that a significant percentage of students, upwards of 50 percent, that are actively engaged in church youth ministries, primarily through their high school years, will no longer be actively engaging with a community of faith to continue pursuing their discipleship after leaving those ministries. So even those churches with youth ministries that have large numbers of students participating consistently should look beyond the current indications of effectiveness to consider how their young people will be engaging their discipleship after they graduate out of those programs.

It is important to note that the concern being raised here is not the loss of church attendance in itself. The concern is that this pattern of dropping out or drifting away from the church is an indication of something deeper. The concern is that the efforts of countless churches across America to nurture the spiritual formation and discipleship of their adolescents is failing to instill in them the commitment and patterns of intentional engagement they need to continue pursuing Christ in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Plenty of social and religious commentators have suggested that church participation is not a true indication of a person's faith identity. Perhaps, therefore, a young person's move away from the church does not necessarily indicate a move away from their faith. Tim Clydesdale proposes that young people after high school can simply set aside and "lock away" parts of their identities, like their faith engagement, while it is

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<sup>24</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 213.



not socially conducive for them to express those aspects, and he argues that those parts of their identity remain viable and intact for years while hidden to be later retrieved when appropriate.<sup>25</sup> While that might be possible for some, this interpretation, however, seems rather tenuous for most. Identity formation unfolds in the context of relationships, decisions, and experiences. Clydesdale even makes that point in explaining why young people feel the need to lock away their religious identities.<sup>26</sup> It is true that part of adolescent identity formation involves the construction and exploration of multiple selves before these get integrated into a unified, cohesive identity, a concept that will be explored in depth in chapter 4. So perhaps young people are simply shifting focus from one of their multiple selves to others. However, what Clydesdale is describing really amounts to shutting down or closing off one of those selves. In the simplest terms, those parts of a person's identity that are consistently denied, closed off, and hidden by choice will not be integrated into a person's lasting, stable identity.

Just as importantly, it has always been a basic conviction of orthodox Christianity that the Church, in whatever local form it might take, is a vital—even necessary—context for a person's discipleship. The church serves not merely to offer spiritual resources for the individual's encouragement and growth but also to draw them into a transformative connection with the family of faith that reshapes their values around worshipping God and serving others. Of course, throughout history there may be viable examples of faithful followers of Jesus living out their discipleship apart from the church, but these

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

would be the exception to the norm. It is hard to envision significant numbers of young people actively pursuing Christ and intentionally living out their faith without any engagement with some local community of faith representing the Church. The simple reality is that engagement with the church is just as important for adolescents after high school, if not more. So, it has to be concluded that the loss of the church's engagement with young people from their mid- to late-adolescence represents their loss of engagement with their discipleship and to some degree with Christ. Thriving, lasting youth ministries are failing to produce thriving, lasting faith engagement in their teens.

Kinnaman summed up the challenge well:

Teen church engagement remains robust, but many of the enthusiastic teens so common in North American churches are not growing up to be faithful young adult disciples of Christ... The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it's a disciple-making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.<sup>27</sup>

Community Presbyterian Church is a part of this same cohort and culture of youth ministry facing this challenge and there is no local evidence to suggest that its ministry is doing any better. Young people are failing to embrace and be embraced by the church as their discipleship is taking shape. As a result, they are graduating from the church and perhaps from their faith when they graduate from high school.

This raises serious concerns about the current approach, as the church is failing to see the results it is hoping to achieve. It has to be assumed that the church is failing to provide the kind of nurture that adolescents really need. If things look effective on the surface of all the church's ministry activity with teens, then the problem must lie at some

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<sup>27</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 21.

deeper level. In other words, if the church's ministry efforts appear to be nurturing the spiritual formation of students but are failing to establish a foundation for life-long discipleship, it is likely that the current approach is failing to address the deeper, formative needs of the students it is serving. The church needs to find new approaches that will bring the work of discipleship deeper into the lives of adolescents and bring adolescents deeper into the life of the church. All this points to the need to develop a more robust practical theology of adolescent discipleship. Constructing such a theology will require taking seriously the developmental needs of adolescents as an aspect of God's intent for human flourishing, examining the ways those needs are being addressed or neglected in our current practices, and then building a biblical framework for envisioning the church's practical response to those needs.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES AND VULNERABILITIES OF ADOLESCENCE

The work of developing a practical theology of adolescent discipleship must begin with a clear understanding of the context of adolescence itself. For many, however, adolescence represents a period of ambiguity, misunderstanding, and outright confusion. That is true both for adolescents themselves and for those seeking to care for them. A number of foundational questions about this developmental stage do not have simple answers. These include questions of how to define adolescence itself, what boundaries delineate adolescence as a distinct life stage or succession of stages, how to distinguish developmental factors that are biological from those that are sociological, what constitutes and contributes to healthy adolescent development, where to locate the unique place within society that adolescents should occupy, how the larger society should nurture and support them, what particular needs and liabilities are inherent to adolescence, and how the majority of adolescents in American society are faring today. Those are some of the issues that need to inform a deeper theological reflection on what God intends for a person's development from childhood to adulthood, what spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal needs God intends to nurture through that

developmental process, and how God might be clarifying the call of the church to minister to those who are living and growing through their adolescence in our present context. As a formative stage of human development, adolescence is in itself an important context for ministry that deserves careful study and thoughtful reflection.

Adolescence refers to a particular developmental phase encompassing several important changes taking place within a person between childhood and adulthood. These changes are necessary for a person to develop into a mature, healthy, fully formed adult and are both internally driven by human physiology and externally shaped by interpersonal influences. Beyond the individual, however, adolescence also refers to a socially constructed space that young people occupy within society between the social place they occupied in the family and community as children and the social place they will later occupy as adults. This is a social space in many ways defined for adolescents by cultural history and the sources of authority around them. At the same time, it is also a social space they construct for themselves. Finally, in a deeper sense, adolescence also refers to a significant part of a person's spiritual journey. It is a period in which moral questions, philosophical viewpoints, and basic worldviews are being explored and reconstructed in ways that are significantly deeper and more enduring than in childhood. In the midst of that exploration, adolescence is a period in which deep spiritual commitments are being formed or changed and solidified, at least tentatively, as they approach adulthood. All of these different facets of adolescence help to clarify the context of ministry for those seeking to nurture lasting discipleship among the young people in their communities.

## The Socially Constructed Reality of Adolescence

American culture today seems to assume and even take for granted that adolescence is a universal, self-evident, and unavoidably natural part of growing up.<sup>1</sup> It is true that many biologically determined changes shape how adolescence is defined as a stage of human development. However, the ways these physiological developments are understood, interpreted, and used to define distinct life stages have naturally been quite different in various cultures in different times and places. Even in our American context, the definition and experience of adolescence has changed dramatically over the past century. Therefore, it is important to recognize adolescence as not just a biological reality but as a socially constructed reality as well. That is why many historians and sociologists speak of adolescence as an invention or construction of American society.<sup>2</sup> That is not to suggest that it is uniquely American. Adolescence in a variety of similar forms has existed in other places and times. But seeing adolescence as a socially constructed reality as much as a biological inevitability should lead those working with teens to give careful attention to the ways this construct continues to change for young people and how those changes impact adolescents positively or detrimentally.

In simplest terms, adolescence is that developmental span between childhood and adulthood that starts with the onset of puberty and finishes with the attainment of adult

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 15.

<sup>2</sup> See John Modell and Madeline Goodman, "Historical Perspectives," in *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*, edited by S. Shirley Feldman and Glen R. Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), or Robert Epstein, *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* (Fresno, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2010).

status in society. The beginning of adolescence is rather easy to define in biological terms, since the physiological changes that mark the beginning of the sexual maturation process is clear and consistent. But the end of adolescence is far more difficult to define. The achievement of sexual maturity is attained far earlier in a person's development than the achievement of adulthood in our society. In recent decades, adult roles and responsibilities have become far more ambiguous in American culture and the pathways to reach them have become far more unclear and uncertain than for previous generations. For example, one widely assumed indicator of achieved adulthood is financial independence and economic self-sufficiency. In recent decades, however, the disproportionate growth of college debt, housing prices, costs of health care, and costs of consumer goods compared to the more modest concurrent gains in earning potential have made that goal far more difficult for young adults to attain today. Furthermore, as young people are now getting married later in life than previous generations, as careers paths are becoming far more fluid, and as traditional roles in society continue to be redefined, historically accepted markers of adulthood in American culture no longer define the achievement of adulthood with the same clarity as they once did. What is clear is that the length of adolescence in America has increased significantly over the past several decades. As Jeffrey Arnett found, "only in their late twenties and early thirties do a clear majority of people indicate that they feel they have reached adulthood."<sup>3</sup> Adolescence now lasts at least ten years for most and even longer for many.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (May 2000): 471.

This shift makes all the clearer the degree to which adolescence is shaped by sociological forces as well as biological ones. In fact, recent research sheds new light on the interplay between biological and sociological factors involved in the completion of adolescence. Recent brain studies reveal new dimensions of the cognitive developments taking place throughout adolescence and indicate that the prolonging of the later stages of adolescence actually is tied to the prolonging of developmental processes in the brain. In particular, the final stages of brain development are not complete until the mid-twenties in most people (stages that involve changes to the brain's network connectivity in the frontal regions that control self-regulation and long-range planning) and these developments are actually dependent on an individual's personal experiences into late adolescence.<sup>4</sup> These findings suggest intertwining causes and effects between biological and sociological factors operating as the basis for the ways adolescence has taken shape in our society and continues to change. These complexities make clear that adolescence cannot simply be ignored or dismissed, regardless of whether this stage of life is viewed in a positive or negative light.

### **Contrary Perceptions of Adolescence**

Common adult perceptions of adolescence are full of contradictions. Popular opinions about the current experience of teenagers, opinions about what teenagers really need, and opinions about teenagers themselves span the spectrum from idealistic

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle K. Jetha and Sidney J. Segalowitz, *Adolescent Brain Development: Implications for Behavior* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2012), 11-12.



optimism to genuine despair. Thomas Hine captured this ambivalence in his history of adolescence in America:

Our beliefs about teenagers are deeply contradictory: They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail, vulnerable creatures. They are children. They are sex fiends. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all.<sup>5</sup>

Even in everyday conversations about teenagers, it is common to hear adults speak of teenagers with both admiration and contempt, with envy of all their opportunities and regret for their unavoidable struggles, with appreciation for their aptitude for embracing technological developments and annoyance at their disregard for traditions, with both hope for their futures and fear for their lack of preparedness.

Perhaps those contradictory views of adolescence are most pronounced in response to the question of how well teens today are faring in society. Some are sure that adolescents in America today have it better than ever before. Many are convinced they have it far worse. Teens today certainly seem to have access to far greater discretionary spending than previous generations ever had. The current generation of adolescents are already spending up to \$143 billion each year and will become the highest spending generation in America as soon as the year 2020.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, the cost of their education is skyrocketing, and current college students are going to graduate with three times more debt than just fifteen years ago (\$1.3 trillion in sum).<sup>7</sup> The academic

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<sup>5</sup> Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Fromm, "How Much Financial Influence Does Gen Z Have?" *Forbes*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jefffromm/2018/01/10/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-financial-impact-of-gen-z-influence/#643f775856fc> (accessed October 5, 2018).

achievement of today's teens appears to be exceeding their predecessors, considering the rising grade point averages of high school students over the past decades and the increasing number of advance placement courses students are taking. Parents today commonly joke that a 5.0 grade point average did not even exist in their day and that the vast majority of their generation left college courses for college. Yet, along with this increasing academic performance, competition for university admissions has also increased, leaving many teens today fearful that they have little chance of being accepted to their schools of choice.<sup>8</sup> To keep up, students in several high-performing California high schools were found to spend an average of over three hours on homework each night.<sup>9</sup> Those academic pressures are contributing to a twenty year declining trend in the number of high school students getting an average of seven hours of sleep per night.<sup>10</sup> Yet, many of these same students seem to have capacity to spend record amounts of leisure time staring at their screens. A 2015 study of more than two thousand thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds found they spend an average of nine hours per day consuming digital media purely for entertainment purposes.<sup>11</sup> While that appears to indicate a tremendous

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Feiveson, Alvaro Mezza, and Kamila Sommer, "Student Loan Debt and Aggregate Consumption Growth," FEDS Notes, February 21, 2018, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/student-loan-debt-and-aggregate-consumption-growth-20180221.htm> (accessed October 5, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Anemona Hartocollis, "Greater Competition for College Places Means Higher Anxiety, Too," *New York Times*, April 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/us/greater-competition-for-college-places-means-higher-anxiety-too.html> (accessed October 5, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Mollie Galloway, Jerusha Conner, and Denise Pope, "Nonacademic Effects of Homework in Privileged, High-Performing High Schools," *The Journal of Experimental Education* 8, no. 4 (2013): 490–510.

<sup>10</sup> Katherine M. Keyes, Julie Maslowsky, Ava Hamilton, and John Schultenber, "The Great Sleep Recession: Changes in Sleep Duration Among US Adolescents, 1991-2012," *Pediatrics* 135, no. 3 (March 2015): 460-468.

amount of leisure, many experts are now recognizing the addictive nature of internet use and seeing such a statistic as indicative of a compulsion or addiction (now with the new diagnostic term, “problematic interactive media use”) rather than simply a form of recreation.<sup>12</sup> In terms of the overall outward health of adolescents, several indicators are positive: Rates of cigarette smoking among twelfth grade students dropped from 28.8 percent in 1976 to just 5.5 percent in 2015, rates of teen pregnancies dropped from 41.5 percent in 2007 to 22.3 percent in 2015, and the number of total deaths among fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in America dropped by 33.5 percent from 1980 to 2016.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, indications of struggles with emotional health and even rates of teen suicide are dramatically rising. While teens are more connected to others through digital media and social platforms than ever before, they are at the same time experiencing less social support than generations before them. These last issues will be explored in more depth below.

These contradictory indicators reveal how important it is not to oversimplify any assessment of overall well-being among teens. An accurate picture of adolescents in the

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<sup>11</sup> “The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens,” Common Sense Media, [https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census\\_executivesummary.pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census_executivesummary.pdf), 2015 (accessed October 5, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Rich, Michael Tsappis, and Jill R. Kavanaugh, “Problematic Interactive Media Use Among Children and Adolescents: Addiction, Compulsion, or Syndrome?” in *Internet Addiction in Children and Adolescents: Risk Factors, Assessment, and Treatment*, eds. Kimberly S. Young, and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2017), 3-28.

<sup>13</sup> “Adolescents and Tobacco: Trends,” Office of Adolescent Health, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/substance-use/drugs/tobacco/trends/index.html> (accessed October 5, 2018); “Birth Rates (Live Births) per 1,000 Females Aged 15-19 Years, by Race and Ethnicity, 2007-2015,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/alt-text/birth-rates-chart-2007-2015-text.htm> (accessed October 5, 2018); “Table 20. Leading Causes of Death and Numbers of Deaths, by Age: United States, 1980 and 2016,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/2017/020.pdf> (accessed October 5, 2018).

context of American society will take a careful look at both the assets they are offered and the liabilities they face. For the sake of ministry, however, it is the difficult challenges facing our teenagers that need far greater attention from church leaders. In fact, closer examination of the developmental process of adolescence will reveal in subsequent chapters the kinds and levels of support teens need for healthy personal development into adulthood, and a closer examination of the social realities facing teens will reveal how lacking this support actually is for most. The deeper reality facing our young people is that most of the outwardly visible indications of success and well-being are actually masking deeper, internalized struggles that are taking a profound toll on the majority of them.

### **The Current Social Realities Undermining Healthy Adolescent Development and Discipleship**

Healthy, successful adolescent development requires high levels of social support. The nature of that support and the way that it operates to confer developmental advantages to youth will be explored in chapter 4, but most agree that the support of family members, positive peer interactions, and caring adults from the broader community is vital to the well-being of teens. Unfortunately, however, that support is declining for most adolescents. The increasing fragmentation of American society in general means that teenagers today are growing up in a less relationally integrated world. This deficit of social connectedness at large is then compounded by the particular isolation of teens within the broader social context around them.

The American society in which teens are growing up today seems to be losing its social glue. Several well-known and widely received recent publications have addressed

this trend: Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* in 2000, Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz's *The Lonely American* in 2009, and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* in 2011 all brought into focus the loss of social cohesion in our society.<sup>14</sup> As a people, Americans are simply less available, less connected, and less invested in supporting one another than they were just a couple generations ago. Whatever the causes and whatever the trajectory of this trend might be, most agree this loss of connection can be seen in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and churches. Similarly, there seems to be far less homogeneity and consensus among the interactions people experience throughout their daily activities in the realm of values, beliefs, and worldviews. The irony of our present situation is that the progress of technology and the arrival of new social media platforms continue to offer the promise or at least the illusion of making people more connected than ever before. Yet, people today seem to know less of each other, seem to be offering less social support to one another, and collectively seem to be drifting apart from one another. Robert Putnam has studied this trend from a variety of angles and followed a number of leading indicators to offer this summary assessment: "For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000); Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz, *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 27.

Putnam is not alone in this appraisal. Henk de Roest cites several other sociologists who point to this decline in the connectedness between people in our society today:

According to Anthony Giddens, Richard Sennett, Zygmunt Bauman, Jose Maruicio Domingues and other distinguished sociologists, in late modern societies, the days of the close bonds between the individual and one single institution, i.e. one church, one company, one association and even one marriage are gone. Mobility and selectivity widen the horizons. Lasting participation in one group, movement or institution no longer goes without saying... There are less and less places left in which people are long-term witnesses of each other's lives, places where 'everybody knows your name.'<sup>16</sup>

This social fragmentation affects the entirety of American society, but its impact on adolescents is especially magnified for two reasons. First, as chapter 4 will explore in depth, social support is vitally necessary for the healthy development of young people as they work through the key psychosocial developmental tasks of adolescence. At a developmental stage in which social support is so important, its loss is all the more detrimental. Studies conducted by developmental psychologists have drawn attention to the impact of this fragmentation on teens and their development, as Noam and Fiore sum up: "Our own studies suggest that adolescents are especially vulnerable to the fragmentation of interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and interpretive models of understanding reality at a time when the psychosocial task is to create a cohesive and overarching identity."<sup>17</sup>

Second, in the midst of this broad cultural trend of increasing fragmentation, teens in particular as a subgroup are being cut off more and more from the support of other

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<sup>16</sup> Henk de Roest, "The Precarious Church: Developing Congregations in an Individualized Society," *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 205.

<sup>17</sup> Gil G. Noam and Nina Fiore, "Relationships Across Multiple Settings: An Overview," *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice, and Research* 103 (Fall 2004): 10.

segments of our society. While younger children still hold a place of privileged care and protection, teens are more commonly assumed not only to need less adult nurture and care but even to resist the presence of adults in their lives. This separation is so pervasive as to become definitive of the American adolescent experience for at least one author: “In the United States today adolescence is characterized by marked age segregation and little regular interaction with adults.”<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, this loss of social integration of teens into networks of adult relationships actually began in the golden years of the American teenager in the 1950s. The spread of compulsory education through twelfth grade and the rise of the social importance of high schools were reflections of a collective intention to create a sheltered space for teenagers to grow and develop to their fullest potential without adult burdens. But the teen subculture that grew as a result had the effect of pulling teens further away from the world of adults, postponing their acceptance in society as adults, and creating an isolated social space for teens populated almost exclusively by their peers. While in many ways these changes were protective, supportive, and nurturing of teens, they nonetheless contributed to a narrowing of the array of adults outside the family that were actively involved in the lives of adolescents. The sociological changes that have continued to alter the adolescent experience in more recent decades have been driven less by positive intentions and more by unintended consequences of larger shifts in our society.

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<sup>18</sup> Glen R. Elliot and S. Shirley Feldman, “Capturing the Adolescent Experience,” in *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*, edited by Glen R. Elliot and S. Shirley Feldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 3.

Over recent decades, increasing competition in academics has shifted focus from learning and growth to performance outcomes, changes in the demands of standardized curriculum have given teachers far less control over how they teach, and declining financial resources for schools have resulted in increased class sizes. All of these factors put increasing pressures on teachers so that even the most skilled and personally invested among them are simply less available to address the needs of individual students.

Organized sports, both in and outside of schools, were once primarily focused on the benefits they offered kids: comradery, team work, exercise, socialization, and personal athletic development. As the world of youth sports has grown more competitive, the focus of purpose has shifted from benefiting the kids to benefiting the team and athletic program. Where youth sports once cast a wide net to include as many kids as possible, teams have grown far more selective of who they allow to play for them, and many parents are now pushing their kids into peewee and junior leagues and even individual coaching at increasingly younger ages just to help them make the cut at the high school level. Sadly, most coaches, especially at the high school level, seem to display far more concern for the team record than for individual players. This same increased competition and drive toward performance success rather than personal growth and development can be seen in almost every form of extracurricular activities offered to teens—even in the arts. The result is that those adults leading these activities for adolescents are less relationally available for them and less personally supportive of their individual development.

Even parents, who function as the foundation of support for adolescents, increasingly struggle to manage their own lives, and many are less available to be there



for their children as a result.<sup>19</sup> David Elkind explains that many parents “expend so much effort coping with the daily stress of living that there is little strength or enthusiasm left over for parenting. They—we—are unable to put our knowledge about children into practice. We hurry children because stress induces us to put our own needs ahead of their needs.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the current pace and demands of life mean that even parents actively involved in the lives of their teens are not necessarily emotionally available.

It might be assumed that youth from more affluent communities might have more present, connected, and supportive parents, but this is not the case. Levine points out that “as a group, affluent teens are less likely to feel close to their parents than children in poverty—less likely than any other group of teens, for that matter.”<sup>21</sup> This lack of relational availability leaves adolescents today cut off in effect from the support of the adults around them. Smith and Denton offer this assessment of the isolation of adolescents today: “viewed in broad historical perspective, contemporary teenage autonomy from adults is unprecedented and astounding. Significant numbers of teens today live their lives with little but the most distant adult direction and oversight.”<sup>22</sup>

In describing and attempting to quantify this trend, Putnam employs the concept of social capital, a term which he defines as referring to social networks, connections

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<sup>19</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 96.

<sup>20</sup> David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Gowing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.

among individuals, and the “norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”<sup>23</sup> The concept of social capital is helpful in an examination of what is happening in our culture because it simplifies the totality of what is meant by the quality and quantity of social networks and connections between people. Putnam reflects on the importance of this diminishing asset in the lives of real people, especially in the development of the next generation:

Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. A considerable body of research dating back at least fifty years has documented that trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child’s family, school, peer group, and larger community have wide-ranging effects on the child’s opportunities and choices and, hence, on his behavior and development... Statistically, the correlation between high social capital and positive child development is as close to perfect as social scientists ever find in data analyses of this sort.<sup>24</sup>

Putnam is just one of many voices that have called attention to the concerning decline of social capital in American society. While not all scholars agree on the magnitude of this sociological decline, there is a broad consensus on the overall decline of social capital in our society. Costa and Kahn surveyed several studies and highlighted this consensus:

Our examination of U.S. trends in social capital produced both inside the community and the home showed that on the whole, both types of social capital have fallen with the biggest declines among those produced inside the home and moderate declines in those produced within the community. Whether the magnitude of the decline in social capital produced within the community is large enough to cause alarm is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-297.

<sup>25</sup> Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, “Understanding the American Decline in Social Capital,” *Kyklos* 56 (2003): 40.

Social capital, as a measure of the relational support available to a person, is one of the most important assets for the healthy development of adolescents. But even as this asset is declining in our society at large, it is our adolescents that are losing this support more than any other group. Chap Clark, after his own ethnographic study of the lives of contemporary teens, summarized the scope of this unmet need among young people and characterized it not merely as isolation, but as abandonment.

Adolescents have a longing that parents, teachers, and other adults have ceased as a community to fulfill. The reasons are many and varied, but this concept of the systemic abandonment of adolescents as a people group seems to capture the widest range of descriptors used by careful observers of adolescents and adolescents themselves... The young have not arrogantly turned their backs on the adult world. Rather they have been forced by a personal sense of abandonment to band together and create a world of their own—separate, semisecret, and vastly different from the world around them.<sup>26</sup>

For those who care about the well-being of adolescents, the implications of this assessment cannot be overlooked.

### **Declining Adolescent Well-Being in the Face of Increasing Stressors**

While adolescents today experience less relational nurture and support from the adults around them, their pervasive sense of isolation is being compounded by rising pressures, demands, and stresses from multiple sources. As already mentioned, academic stress has become pervasive among adolescents, especially in more affluent communities. Today's teenagers also deal with higher rates of family instability than ever before. A study of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey from 2008 found that only 45 percent of American fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds have grown up with an intact

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<sup>26</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 28.

family, with both their biological mother and father legally married to one another throughout their childhood.<sup>27</sup> Dealing with divorce and the complexities of blended families are increasingly common sources of stress among teens. Additionally, the rise of social media has created a relentless pressure to keep up with countless digital conversations and to maintain one's image, and this trend now forces already self-conscious teens to continually publish images of themselves for public scrutiny. These accumulating pressures are taking a toll on this generation of adolescents.

Substance abuse is one indicator of the struggles of adolescents, especially because it is not just a form of delinquency but for many a form of self-medicating as an attempt to cope with emotional distress. The rate of marijuana use has not changed dramatically over recent years, but one in five high school students report current marijuana use and 6 percent of high school seniors report using marijuana on a daily basis.<sup>28</sup> With recent declines in cigarette use, the numbers of students smoking marijuana daily exceeds those smoking cigarettes daily among all eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade students.<sup>29</sup> Over 13 percent of high school students reported binge drinking within the past thirty days.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Patrick Fagan, "The US Index of Belonging and Rejection," The Family Research Council, December 2010, FRC.org, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF10L25.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Laura Kann et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance –United States 2017," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Surveillance Summaries* 67, no. 8 (June 2018): 1; National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Monitoring the Future Survey: High School and Youth Trends," published by the National Institutes of Health, December 2017, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/monitoring-future-survey-high-school-youth-trends> (accessed October 9, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Kann et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance –United States 2017," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Surveillance Summaries* 67, no. 8 (June 2018): 47.

A newer form of substance abuse that has been on the rise is the abuse of prescription stimulant medications that have become known as “study drugs,” because of the belief among teens and young adults that these drugs will help them to mentally focus and perform better academically.<sup>31</sup> An interesting insight into the rise of Adderall, perhaps the most popular study drug, comes from looking at Google search rates. The prevalence of searches for the word “adderall” has risen steadily since the early 2000s, but more interestingly, searches for the combined phrase “adderall studying,” which first appeared in 2009, has not only risen steadily but shown consistent peaks each year around the times of school exams and disappears during the summer.<sup>32</sup> The current rate of illicit use of Adderall is about 6 percent among high school seniors.<sup>33</sup> The illegal use of this prescription drug is a clear indication of the academic pressures adolescents are experiencing today.

Even in the 1990s, David Elkind declared a state of crisis for teens: “On every measure that we have—physical, psychological, and academic—young people today are doing worse than their counterparts did half a century ago. In the postmodern world, adolescents have to cope with psychological stressors that could never have been

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<sup>31</sup> Erik MacLaren, “History and Statistics of ‘Study Drugs,’” Drugabuse.com, 2018, <https://drugabuse.com/library/history-and-statistics-of-study-drugs/> (accessed October 9, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> “Rise of the Study Drug: What Social Media Reveals About Students’ Use and Abuse of Adderall,” Drugabuse.com, 2018, [https://drugabuse.com/featured/rise-of-the-study-drug-adderall/#.W70M\\_BNKiu5](https://drugabuse.com/featured/rise-of-the-study-drug-adderall/#.W70M_BNKiu5) (accessed October 9, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse, “Monitoring the Future Study: Trends in Prevalence of Various Drugs,” published by the National Institutes of Health, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/trends-statistics/monitoring-future/monitoring-future-study-trends-in-prevalence-various-drugs> (accessed October 9, 2018).

imagined by adolescents growing up before mid-century.”<sup>34</sup> Those concerns are even graver today. While a study in 2010 found that about 32 percent of all adolescents had an anxiety disorder of some type and about 14 percent had a mood disorder (depression, bipolar, etc.), it also found that only 8 percent and 11 percent, respectively, were deemed to warrant intervention.<sup>35</sup> That means that most teens living with anxiety and depression are going unnoticed and unsupported. Some might assume that struggles with anxiety and depression would be more common among teens on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. Madeline Levine, however, argues that the rates of depression and anxiety among girls from financially affluent families has been shown to be actually much higher than the national averages of adolescent girls.<sup>36</sup> In fact, rather than conferring a benefit or protection to teens, according to Levine, affluence magnifies these negative effects: “Depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse are all hitting kids from comfortable homes at a rate clearly in excess of normal expectancy. Our most current data suggests that as many as 30 to 40 percent of twelve- to eighteen-year-olds from affluent homes are experiencing troubling psychological symptoms.”<sup>37</sup>

Sadly, in far too many cases, the effect of these stressors on vulnerable adolescents who lack the support they need to cope with them is a hopelessness that leads them to want to end their lives. The CDC recently published its findings that the rate of

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<sup>34</sup> Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*, 215.

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Ries Merikangas et al., “Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in U.S. Adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication– Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A),” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49, no. 10 (October 2010): 980-989.

<sup>36</sup> Levine, *The Price of Privilege*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

suicides among those between the ages of ten and nineteen rose 56 percent from 2007 to 2016, recently rising above the rate of homicides in this age group to a new level of over 18 percent of all deaths.<sup>38</sup> A much larger number, totaling 7 percent of all high school students, recently reported having actually attempted suicide in the past year, over 13 percent had formulated a plan for how they would attempt suicide, and as many as 17 percent at least seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>39</sup> Those statistics are a silent cry for help from a generation of adolescents that are cut off and in effect abandoned by the adults that should be caring for them.

### **Recognizing Adolescents as a Vulnerable People**

Adolescent development is becoming more precarious as the path from childhood to adulthood becomes harder to navigate in a society that is adding new burdens and demands during this stage and as young people today find themselves more alone on that journey than those who have gone before them. As has become clear in so many studies shared here, teens today experience increasing levels of pressure and stress while finding decreasing levels of support and care. As a result, this age group is showing clear indications that, on the whole, they are not faring nearly as well as many outward measures might indicate. Or worse, as many experts have stated, teens today are in crisis,

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<sup>38</sup> Sally C. Curtin et al., “Recent Increases in Injury Mortality Among Children and Adolescents Aged 10–19 Years in the United States: 1999–2016,” National Vital Statistics Report, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Health Statistics, 16 (4), June 2018, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67\\_04.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr67/nvsr67_04.pdf) (accessed October 9, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Laura Kann et al., “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance –United States 2017,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Surveillance Summaries* 67, no. 8 (June 2018): 24-26.

whether they know it or not. Now, more than ever, the ways the church engages and ministers to this group is vitally important.

Throughout Scripture, God expresses a special concern for the poor and needy, those who are least resourced and most vulnerable. In Isaiah 58, God calls his people to bring justice to the oppressed, to share food with the hungry, to provide shelter to the poor wanderer, to clothe the naked, and not to turn away from their own flesh and blood in need. Proverbs 31:8-9 teaches the godly to defend the poor and needy and to speak up for the rights of the destitute who cannot speak up for themselves. Jeremiah 22:16 commends rulers who defend the cause of the poor and needy and declares that such actions show what it really means to know the Lord. In Matthew 25, Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned among us, so much so that he says he receives whatever his followers do for those in such need as if it were done for him. And James 1:27 summarizes this theme with the statement, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” These verses, along with dozens more like them, bring to the forefront of biblical ethics God’s prioritization of how the people of God should care for the poor and needy. In light of all the struggles they face, adolescents deserve to be considered among such poor and needy people.

For those living in affluent, suburban communities, however, it might not be so clear who the needy and vulnerable among them are—especially if only the visible socioeconomic factors are considered. Yet, there is another kind of neediness and poverty, beyond the lack of material and financial resources, that certainly has God’s attention and deserves the church’s, too: a neediness for personal care and a poverty of



social support. Teens growing up today without the nurture they need to become the people God intended represent a different kind of poor and needy within the church. Even those teens growing up in with an overt abundance of all the possessions a young person could hope for and those who from outside appearances seem to be living the best version of the American dream are experiencing a very real internal poverty. It is a poverty of soul that comes from being overindulged materialistically, being overdriven to perform outwardly, and simultaneously being overlooked or neglected emotionally and relationally. Adolescents, simply by nature of the complex internal developmental challenges they are facing, need a great deal of support and care. Yet, many of them feel orphaned without any real network of supportive relationships. The church needs to recognize them as a vulnerable and struggling group within its community, a subset of the population that deserves a greater measure of ministerial attention and care.

### **The Unique Window of Opportunities for Discipleship in Adolescence**

In the midst of serious vulnerabilities that demand attention and support, adolescence also presents important opportunities for discipleship that should be just as motivating for those serving teens in ministry. Adolescence is a time of remarkable internal personal growth. The new mental capacities that come with adolescence are not just the result of acquiring increasing knowledge but rather the result of acquiring new ways of thinking. Adolescence brings new cognitive abilities that enable young teens to begin to think more abstractly, to begin to see oneself from an external perspective, to begin to put oneself in someone else's situation (first cognitively and later emotionally), and to begin to consider not only complex realities but also complex possibilities. In

terms of cognitive developmental stages, in the tradition of Piaget, adolescence is the time when the mind is shifting from concrete operations to formal operations, making it possible for the adolescent to “generate and reflect upon possibilities, to think and plan in long range terms... to reflect on oneself as a system in process with alternative paths and potentials, and the ability to consider hypothetical, improbable, even bizarre transformations of current reality.”<sup>40</sup> These new mental capacities present significant new opportunities for spiritual development in adolescence. When these new forms of awareness of the world, of reality, of possibility, and especially the new awareness of the self are confronted by new social realities, adolescents find themselves consciously or unconsciously asking profound, universal questions about themselves—questions about who they are, who they are supposed to become, where they fit in, who cares about them, whether their life has significance, and what larger purposes they are supposed to fulfill. While some adolescents can articulate these questions and the weight they carry, most are not fully aware they are struggling with them. Yet, pursuing answers to such defining questions is a significant part of becoming an adult. And those questions present incredible opportunities for ministry as they naturally tend to draw young people to explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives.

New cognitive capacities and affective depths open the adolescent mind to new ways to contemplate the abstract aspects of God and faith, new ways to care about people and causes, new ways of reasoning about moral issues, and new ways to sort through the contradictions in their own decisions and self-concepts. Naturally, those cognitive

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<sup>40</sup> David Henry Feldman, “Piaget’s Stages: The Unfinished Symphony of Cognitive Development,” *New Ideas in Psychology* 22, no. 3 (December 2004): 175-231.

developments have important implications for the work of discipleship among this age group, because they present significant opportunities for learning and reflecting on spiritual truths in deeper and more formative ways. The changes taking place within the adolescent mind run much deeper than just cognitive capacities, however.

Changes taking place within the adolescent brain drive young people to relate in new ways to others, and even themselves, with an affective intensity that makes this one of the most transformative periods of a person's life. The brain is much more sensitive to environment, experiences, and interpersonal encounters during adolescence than during later periods of development. Based on numerous brain studies in recent years, Steinberg offers two explanations for the heightened sensitivity of the adolescent mind to the lasting impact of what it experiences during this formative period. The first is that higher levels of and sensitivity to neurotransmitters, like dopamine, cause the adolescent brain to be "chemically primed to encode memories more deeply."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the brain's heightened sensitivity to its own neurochemistry during this developmental stage causes adolescents to experience events and relational interactions as more emotionally significant and therefore more memorable, formative, and lasting than at other times of life. The second reason the adolescent brain is uniquely sensitive to transformative experiences is that the adolescent brain is undergoing a period of plasticity that alters its structure and functioning for the remainder of its adult life. As Steinberg points out, this

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<sup>41</sup> Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 21.

sensitivity needs to be understood and appreciated by those who work most closely with young people:

We know now that adolescence is a similarly remarkable period of brain reorganization and plasticity. This discovery is enormously important, with far-reaching implications for how we parent, educate, and treat young people. If the brain is especially sensitive to experience during adolescence, we must be exceptionally thoughtful and careful about the experiences we give people as they develop from childhood into adulthood.<sup>42</sup>

Those same implications are just as important—or even more so—for the kinds of experiences within the community of faith that a church offers its youth to nurture their spiritual formation.

The significance of these changes taking place in the adolescent brain is that they will have life-long consequences. As Newberg and Newberg point out, “Since the [neural] connections that are established and lost during this time will likely become the individual’s neurophysiological ‘setup’ throughout the rest of her life, this is a crucial period of development. This is the period in which the person’s basic approach to life, relationships, his self, and spirituality are galvanized and fully elaborated.”<sup>43</sup> There is no other time in a person’s development like their adolescence, where the emergence of such profound cognitive capacities coincide with a period of such impressionability. As a result, discipleship of young people just may have the potential to be more formative and transformative during this stage than any other.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew B. Newberg and Stephanie K. Newberg, “A Neuropsychological Perspective on Spiritual Development” in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, eds. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagner, and Peter Benson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 191.

Understanding the challenges inherent to adolescence and the profound vulnerabilities of this age group—especially as society places increasing burdens on them while robbing them of the social support they need—the church must recognize adolescents today as a particularly needy people. At the same time, however, the church should recognize the amazing opportunity that adolescence represents as a period of developmental openness and responsiveness. Much of what adolescents experience in these formative years will shape them in enduring ways—for worse or for better.

PART TWO

PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ADOLESCENT DISCIPLESHIP

## CHAPTER 3

### UNCOVERING THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN GOD'S CALL FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND GOD'S DESIGN FOR ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

The needs and vulnerabilities of teenagers, as explored in the previous chapter, provide important context for the development of a practical theology of adolescent discipleship, because this ministry is essentially about partnering with God to meet the needs of young people as they grow into the fully developed people he intends them to become. Yet that context is incomplete without a deeper understanding of the intrinsic needs that arise from the developmental processes of adolescence itself. Alongside all the external sociological factors that bear upon the formation of young people, there are key internal developmental processes that both drive and define the psychosocial growth and transformations seen in adolescence. These developmental processes represent a deeper, more universal set of needs in teens that must be sufficiently met by those who are supporting their personal and spiritual growth in order for that growth to lead to the health and wholeness God wants for them. In fact, if the church is to fulfill its responsibility and calling in the discipleship of its young people, it must strive to operate out of a holistic concern for adolescent development that takes seriously how the spiritual

formation of adolescents is inextricably intertwined with their personal, psychosocial development.

### **Integrating Scriptural Perspectives and Insights from the Developmental Sciences**

The foundation for a more holistic approach to ministry is a more integrated view of humanity. Such an integrated view of the spiritual and psychological dimensions of a person's development has not always been embraced among Christian leaders. For example, James Loder, who has written extensively on spiritual development, insists that "the development of the ego with all its various competencies... unfolds along a different axis from that of spiritual development," and Loder seems to abandon the ego to the lower, instinctive realm of self-preservation and self-satisfaction until it becomes subjugated to the human spirit that has found its ground in God's Spirit.<sup>1</sup> This separation of the ego—along with personality, identity, and psychological drives—from spiritual development denies the important interplay between them and seems to overlook God's design of and intended use of those psychological elements in a person's spiritual development. In contrast, a more integrated view sees the human ego as a central part of the whole person created in God's image. Dallas Willard argues for this essential unity of the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the person in much of his writing about spiritual formation:

Simply put, every human being thinks (has a thought life), feels, chooses, interacts with his or her body and its social context, and (more or less) integrates all of the foregoing as parts of one life. These are essential factors in a human being, and nothing essential to human life falls outside of them. The ideal of the

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<sup>1</sup> James Loder, *Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 72.



spiritual life in the Christian understanding is one where all of the essential parts of the human self are effectively organized around God, as they are restored and sustained by him.<sup>2</sup>

An integrated view of humanity affirms the value of integrating insights from the developmental sciences into a theology of adolescent discipleship. In fact, integrating theological reflection and insights from the social sciences has long been the focus of the work of practical theology. From a theological perspective, the social sciences should be viewed as a field of study that has the potential to reveal God's designs and intentions for human development and fulfillment. Those insights are vital to a theologically grounded praxis of ministry that takes seriously the context of adolescence itself. Steele addresses this integration of theological and developmental perspectives on human development as the necessary integration of holiness and wholeness in the growing person: "We must bring the concepts of holiness and wholeness together... We can assert that Christian maturity generally correlates with human maturity. We are created in the image of God, and our psychological selves are a part of that image. Optimal human development is the correlation of holiness and wholeness."<sup>3</sup> Without that integration, a ministry with adolescents is overlooking part of the humanity of those it serves.

If the same God who provokes spiritual growth is also the Creator who designed the intrinsic developmental processes within each person that shape how they become fully formed adults, then it seems reasonable to expect to find some coinciding alignment between what Scripture upholds as the key aspects of growth toward spiritual maturity

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Les Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 153.

and what the developmental sciences identify as the key psychosocial aspects of adolescent growth toward healthy adulthood. In other words, exploring what it means to grow into spiritual maturity and what it means to grow into psychosocial maturity should reveal some fundamental commonalities. Where the normative developmental processes of adolescence and the formative spiritual tasks of discipleship align, these should then be instructive and directive for the focus of effective ministry with young people. It is in fact this alignment that makes adolescent discipleship potentially one of the most exciting, vital, and rewarding contexts for ministry in the larger community of faith, because it is in adolescence that the physiologically and sociologically driven processes of personal development align so beautifully with the theologically prescribed processes of spiritual development. Of course, the process of spiritual formation can take hold of a person at any age or stage of life, but it will be argued that adolescence offers a unique window of opportunity for spiritual formation to build most naturally upon and even gain impetus from other concurrent developmental processes intrinsic to this life stage.

### **The Normative Developmental Tasks of Adolescence: The Search for Identity, Belonging, and Autonomy**

The search for that alignment must begin with clarity about what the normative developmental processes of adolescence are. The physiological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes that come with each person's growth from childhood into adulthood are diverse and extensive. What is needed is a framework for understanding this period of development that distills and coalesces these diverse aspects of growth into those elements that are most common and essential for the typical adolescent's personal development toward healthy adulthood. A focused set of essential developmental

processes or needs would offer greater clarity to those working to support adolescents through this naturally challenging, if not perilous, period of personal development. Such a list would also help to identify from within the diverse aspects of Christian discipleship those essential elements of spiritual formation that may coincide and thus point toward areas for greater investment and focus of attention and support. Many authors who have studied this period of life have in fact identified just such a list of those elements of adolescent development that are both normative and essential for healthy maturing.

The diverse and interconnected elements of growth and change taking place within the adolescent and the essential processes through which they need to be resolved for healthy adolescent maturation can be conceptualized as developmental tasks.

Havighurst defined a developmental task as a task arising in a particular period of life and which must be successfully achieved for personal happiness, success with later tasks, and approval by society.<sup>4</sup> Differing criteria for what constitutes a developmental task have resulted in different lists of these tasks, and some have been too long to be helpful.<sup>5</sup> The most helpful insights, however, come from understanding developmental tasks not as socially imposed expectations but as deeper, intrinsic drives toward maturity. This is the sense with which Erikson used the term when he spoke of achieving identity as “the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Havighurst, “Research on the Developmental-Task Concept,” *The School Review*, 64 (May 1956): 215.

<sup>5</sup> Working from a definition of developmental task that focused on successfully responding to new social expectations and demands, Havighurst named several developmental tasks: achieving an appropriate giving-receiving pattern of affection, relating to changing social groups, achieving emotional independence from parents, learning one’s psycho-socio-biological sex role, achieving a masculine or feminine role, acquiring a conscience and a scale of moral values which control behavior, and learning intellectual skills.

central task of adolescence.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense of the term, developmental tasks are truly foundational to the movement into and through a particular life stage, arising from internal developmental changes and addressing the deepest and broadest sociological needs of the individual.

With this more foundational sense of the term in mind, three developmental tasks appear to be normative to adolescent maturing. Exploring these will facilitate a clearer understanding of the needs of young people. Clark identifies these three internally motivated drives in the adolescent developmental process as the drive for uniqueness or separateness, the drive for autonomy or self-assertion, and the drive for belonging, community, and interdependence.<sup>7</sup> The drive for uniqueness or separateness corresponds to what Erikson identified as the central developmental task of adolescence: identity formation. Interestingly, Erikson’s explanation of adolescent identity formation also emphasized how deeply rooted it is in one’s relational connections to the surrounding community and in one’s need to find meaningful contributions to that community in vocational opportunities.<sup>8</sup> These two additional facets of identity formation correspond to the drive for belonging and the drive for autonomy identified by Clark. Other authors have presented similar conclusions about these core developmental tasks. For example, Deci and Ryan point to “innate and life-span tendencies toward achieving effectiveness,

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<sup>6</sup> Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 91.

<sup>7</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 22-23 and 133.

connectedness, and coherence.”<sup>9</sup> These three naturally correspond to autonomy (the sense of one’s effectiveness or efficacy in acting and accomplishing), belonging (the sense of one’s relational connectedness in a community), and identity (the sense of self that feels consistent and coherent across time and varying contexts).

These developmental tasks of discovering, co-constructing, and embracing one’s own sense of identity, belonging, and autonomy provide an important and helpful framework for conceptualizing the entire psychosocial developmental process of adolescence on which to build a holistic approach to adolescent discipleship. Research from the social and developmental sciences shed light on the significance of these three normative tasks of adolescent development, why they arise during adolescence, and the support that they require for healthy resolution. This research has been expanded significantly in recent years by the insights gained from brain imaging studies that have revealed key structural and functional changes taking place in adolescent brains.

There is a wide consensus among authors that identity formation is central to the developmental process of adolescence. There are some exceptions to this. Arnett, for example, debates whether identity formation is truly normative and essential for adolescent development, suggesting that most of the research in this area has focused on the progression between developmental stages but not on the role of identity formation itself in the developmental process, and he states that at best, current research has been

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<sup>9</sup> Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, “The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior,” *Psychological Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2000): 229.

inconclusive.<sup>10</sup> Arnett is right in pointing to the need for more research focused on the fundamental role of identity formation within adolescent psychosocial development to validate its perceived prominence and universality. Yet, for decades Erikson's fundamental position on the significance of this aspect of human development has been affirmed by countless others. As Nakkula and Toshalis comment, "It is not a stretch to claim that forming the core of an identity is the pivotal task of adolescence, particularly in a culture as fixated on individual and unique representations of selfhood as ours."<sup>11</sup>

Erikson explained the task of identity formation as not only the normative crisis for this stage of life, but also as one that cannot be undertaken until this stage of life: "not until adolescence does the individual develop the prerequisites in physiological growth, mental maturation, and social responsibility to experience and pass through the crisis of identity."<sup>12</sup> Recent studies have continued to validate the functional centrality of identity formation in adolescence and the timing of adolescence as the period in which a coherent life story and identity construction process emerges.<sup>13</sup> While countless social scientists (and many more casual observers) have noted the intense rise of self-awareness in adolescence, it is only recently becoming clear how structural changes in the brain taking place during adolescence give rise to the teenager's preoccupation with self and the need

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffery Arnett, "Identity Development from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: What We Know and (Especially) Don't Know," in *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, eds. Kate McLean and Moin Syed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Wim Meeus, "The Study of Adolescent Identity Formation 2000-2010: A Review of Longitudinal Research," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21, no. 1 (2011): 89-90.

to build their own sense of self. Siegel's study of brain development research offers an explanation for the timing of identity formation in adolescence: "The remodeling changes in the integrative frontal areas of the cortex are responsible for the finding that as teens we begin to become aware of ourselves and to think about life in conceptual and abstract ways...Even the ability to reflect on our own personalities emerges during the years of adolescence."<sup>14</sup> This self-awareness and social awareness that emerge as a result of the neural remodeling taking place in the prefrontal cortex thus give rise to this drive for identity formation.

The adolescent search for belonging is the drive to find both a sense of security and a sense of value in the context of a network of significant and trusted relationships. In childhood, parents primarily provide that sense of secure attachment and belonging. In adolescence, however, young people pull away, albeit never entirely, from their dependence on parent attachment due largely to the process of individuation and their need to establish their own autonomy distinct from their parents and due also to changes in school and other social structures that lead them to spend increasing time in demanding social environments without their parents. A good deal of insight about this search for belonging comes from attachment theory. While this field of study originally focused on the secure bonds of attachment created between mother and infant and how those shaped mental models that influenced patterns of relating later in life, recent studies of attachment have given greater focus to those processes in adolescence. For example,

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 90.

Scharf and Mayselless suggest that the reason that the adolescent search for belonging can be construed as a developmental task is that almost universally, adolescents shift their dependence for support away from their attachments to parents and therefore need to connect to new sources of attachment among peers and others that will provide both the “safe haven” function of attachment (providing security in times of emotional distress) and the “secure base” function of attachment (bolstering security and confidence to explore their world).<sup>15</sup>

Others support the view that the adolescent search for belonging represents a universal and foundational developmental task. Baumeister and Leary argue that the drive to establish belonging represents a fundamental human need and motivation—one that likely underlies many other observable human drives.<sup>16</sup> Noam and Fiore found that a sense of belonging is critical to healthy development.<sup>17</sup> Roffey cited evidence that social connectedness was the strongest protective factor for adolescents against substance abuse, early sexual initiation, violence, unintentional injury, emotional distress, disordered eating, and both suicidal ideation and attempts.<sup>18</sup> While these findings were tied to measures of connectedness in families and schools, the same was found in studies

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<sup>15</sup> Miri Scharf and Ofra Mayselless, “Putting Eggs in More Than One Basket: A New Look at Developmental Processes of Attachment in Adolescence,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 117 (Fall 2007): 5-10.

<sup>16</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachment as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

<sup>17</sup> Noam and Fiore, “Relationships Across Multiple Settings,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> Sue Roffey, “Inclusive and Exclusive Belonging: The Impact on Individual and Community Well-Being,” *Education and Child Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2013): 43.



of religious group identification.<sup>19</sup> Summing this up, Jose, Ryan, and Pryor state, “there is a general theoretical consensus among the diverse array of researchers that a perceived sense of belonging or connectedness is a basic psychological need, and that when this need is satisfied it brings about positive outcomes.”<sup>20</sup> In this light, belonging is a life-long need. However, in adolescence this drive takes on heightened significance. The individuation process pushes adolescents to establish a new belonging beyond their family and relocate their social belonging among peers and other adults. At the same time, the search for identity triggers a new need to be known in a deeper way by significant others. In support of this view, Scharf and Mayseless connect the individuation process of identity formation to the drive to establish new attachments of belonging as a sequence of developmental tasks in adolescence.<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of attachment theory, the need for attachment in adolescence has shifted from basic survival needs in infancy to the needs of regulating emotional states and finding emotional security.<sup>22</sup>

Seigel suggests several aspects of adolescent brain development that contribute to the intense adolescent drive for belonging. Early in adolescence the limbic region of the

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<sup>19</sup> Renate Ysseldyk, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, “Religiosity as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion from a Social Identity Perspective,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 60-71.

<sup>20</sup> Paul E. Jose, Nicholas Ryan, and Jan Pryor, “Does Social Connectedness Promote a Greater Sense of Well-Being in Adolescence Over Time?” *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 22, no. 2 (2012): 236.

<sup>21</sup> Scharf and Mayseless, “Putting Eggs in More Than One Basket,” 16.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph P. Allen and Nell Manning, “From Safety to Affect Regulation: Attachment from the Vantage Point of Adolescence,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 117 (Fall 2007): 28.

brain, responsible for emotional thinking, becomes more active than either in childhood or adulthood.<sup>23</sup> These changes that begin early in puberty activate new levels of emotional intensity, romantic motivation, and sexual interest, among other things.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, but over a longer period, developments in the prefrontal cortex give rise to new awareness of the self in relation to others and the larger social world, as well as new capacities for empathy toward others.<sup>25</sup> Steinberg's examination of brain studies also identifies the "relationship system" of the brain, which governs how one views and thinks about other people, as one of the three regions of the brain undergoes the most extensive maturation and change during adolescence.<sup>26</sup> All of these changes contribute to the adolescent drive to seek significant relational connection and a secure sense of belonging.

Finally, closely connected to the adolescent striving to establish who one is and with whom one belongs is the striving to establish what it means to be one's own person and what significance or impact one's life is going to have. This is the search for autonomy. It involves both the process of individuation, through which a young person moves from relational dependencies to independence and interdependence, and the process of developing a sense of efficacy and purpose. Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins offer a comprehensive explanation of autonomy in three distinct dimensions:

The behavioral dimension of autonomy has been defined as active, independent functioning including self-governance, self-regulation of behavior, and acting on personal decisions...Cognitive autonomy most often has been defined as a sense

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<sup>23</sup> Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald E. Dahl, "Adolescent Brain Development: A Period of Vulnerabilities and Opportunities," *Annals of the N. Y. Academy of Sciences*, 1021 (2004): 17.

<sup>25</sup> Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 37.

of self-reliance, a belief that one has control over his or her own life, and subjective feelings of being able to make decisions without excessive social validation... The third dimension, emotional autonomy, has been defined as a sense of individuation from parents and relinquishing dependence on them.<sup>27</sup>

The distinctness of these dimensions is not as important for understanding adolescence as is the integrated picture they present of autonomy development. Autonomy describes the development of a multi-layered set of capacities and behavioral patterns. Closely tied to the concept of autonomy are the related concepts of personal agency, efficacy, purpose, and individuation, and each of these aspects of autonomy development contribute to the others. For example, much of the research into the development of purpose, motivation, self-determination, and efficacy among adolescents is really addressing the development of autonomy in this broader sense. It is also important to note that while autonomy is a developmental trait within the individual and arises in part from other developmental processes within the adolescent, autonomy arises also from the social context in which the adolescent is asserting his or her volition, as the individual seeks to balance the need for connectedness with the need for independence. As Deci and Ryan explain, “Autonomy involves being volitional, acting from one’s sense of self and endorsing one’s action. It does not entail being separate from, not relying upon, or being independent from others.”<sup>28</sup> This balance between the individualistic aspect of autonomy and the relational connectedness that supports it is optimal, according to Zimmer-Gembeck and

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<sup>27</sup> Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck and W. Andrew Collins, “Autonomy Development During Adolescence,” in *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence*, eds. Gerald R. Adams and Michael D. Berzonsky (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 175.

<sup>28</sup> Deci and Ryan, “The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Goal Pursuits,” 242.

Collins, for healthy psychological adjustment and development.<sup>29</sup> From their extensive survey of research on the subject, Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins support the view that autonomy development is a key normative developmental task in adolescence,<sup>30</sup> and they are among several sources that emphasize the importance of strong relational support for the healthy outcome of autonomy development.<sup>31</sup> Burrow and Hill demonstrated that the development of one's sense of autonomy is both an important developmental asset in itself and a significant contributor to the identity formation process.<sup>32</sup> Several studies have validated this important connection between identity formation and the development of a sense of purpose in adolescence.<sup>33</sup> Lichtwark-Aschoff et al. even argue that the adolescent striving for autonomy can be interpreted as a "precursor of identity development, aimed at creating a self-determined space for identity exploration."<sup>34</sup>

The adolescent drive for autonomy goes beyond the need to become more self-governed and efficacious. It is also connected to a desire to find purpose and meaning for one's life. Damon describes the adolescent search for purpose as the "universal yearning

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<sup>29</sup> Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, "Autonomy Development During Adolescence," 177.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>31</sup> See also Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 68-78; and Bart Soenens and Maarten Vansteenkiste, "Antecedents and Outcomes of Self-Determination in 3 Life Domains: The Role of Parents' and Teachers' Autonomy Support," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 34, no. 6 (December 2005): 589-604.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony L. Burrow and Patrick L. Hill, "Purpose as a Form of Identity Capital for Positive Youth Adjustment," *Developmental Psychology* 47, no. 4 (2011): 1203.

<sup>33</sup> William Damon, Jenni Menon, and Kendall Cotton Bronk, "The Development of Purpose During Adolescence," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 119-128.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Lichtwark-Aschoff et al., "Time and Identity: A Framework for Research and Theory Formation," *Developmental Review* 28, no. 3 (September 2008): 391.

for a life with meaning.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Erikson suggests that the most disturbing frustration to the adolescent’s striving toward identity formation is the inability to settle on an occupational identity.<sup>36</sup> What Erikson was actually touching on was not the importance of vocation in the sense of employment, but rather the importance of a purposeful sense of autonomy in how it undergirds a person’s sense of identity.

Here too, new insights into adolescent brain development reinforce the understanding of adolescence as a time in which the brain is especially primed to make strong commitments to immediate and future forms of autonomy that hold a clear sense of purpose and significance. As Dahl points out, the same pubertal brain changes that make adolescence a time of passions also make it “a time of passionate commitments to idealistic causes.”<sup>37</sup> This is the neurobiological basis for what Erikson referred to as striving for fidelity, or the search for something to believe in, to be true to, or even to die for.<sup>38</sup> As this new impulse to care about issues and causes is immature in the adolescent it is naturally both overly idealistic and also more ego centric than selfless in its orientation. Therefore, this new drive for teenagers to connect with a cause is at its core a search to see how their lives can make a difference to the larger world around them.

Interpreting all of these insights from the social sciences through a theological lens, it becomes clear that God has built into each person’s neurobiological and

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<sup>35</sup> William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>36</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 132.

<sup>37</sup> Dahl, “Adolescent Brain Development,” 17.

<sup>38</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 233.

psychosocial developmental processes an innate drive to establish three fundamental human assets: identity, belonging, and autonomy. From a theological perspective, the value of these assets is not merely a matter of healthy human functioning but a matter of spiritual functioning and full participation in God's purposes for humanity and for the world. Therefore, these same themes of identity, belonging, and autonomy should be evident in a cursory biblical survey of the basic process of discipleship.

### **The Formative Spiritual Tasks of Discipleship: Fostering New Identity, Belonging, and Autonomy in Christ**

In Scripture, clearly fundamental transformations unfold through the life of discipleship as a result of deepening trust in the person of Jesus Christ. These represent formative goals or tasks for the discipleship process. Of course, it should be acknowledged that movement toward these ends is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, not the result of merely human efforts toward self-improvement. As such, spiritual formation in these specific areas will involve the cooperative strivings of the disciple, but only in a secondary way. Nonetheless, the very basis for ministry itself is the assumption that human efforts can be used by God to nurture the growth and transformation that God intends to bring about in people's lives.

The goal of the ministry of discipleship then is to nurture and partner in God's work in those specific formative aspects that Scripture addresses, and Scripture brings into the foreground three formative tasks in particular. The first and most profound of these spiritually formative tasks is the discovering and embracing of a new identity in Christ. The second is the discovery of a new belonging in Christ—both in the sense of a deep, personal connectedness to God through Christ and in the sense of a new

connectedness to the body of Christ or community of faith. And the third is the discovery of a new kingdom oriented purpose in Christ.

Before exploring each of these, it should be admitted that not everyone would support a theology of discipleship that focuses on formation, let alone identifies specific formative tasks. McGarry, for example, argues that Bonhoeffer's theology of Christian discipleship had an exclusive focus on immediate and simple obedience to the commands of Christ, locating Christian formation as only a byproduct of that obedience and exclusively the work of God.<sup>39</sup> As McGarry quotes, Bonhoeffer made this point explicit: "Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey. Do not interpret or apply, but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus' word is heard."<sup>40</sup> That view captures the essential imperative of Jesus's authoritative commands to his disciples, but it overlooks much of Jesus's teaching that clearly sought to transform the disciples' understanding of God, faith, or self. Accordingly, Willard cautions against such an approach to discipleship that makes external, outward obedience the main focus of spiritual formation: "The 'outward' interpretation of spiritual formation, emphasizing specific *acts* as it does, will merely increase 'the righteousness of the scribe and Pharisee.' It will not, as we must, 'go beyond it' (Matthew 5:20 PAR) to achieve genuine transformation of *who I am* through and through—Christ's man or woman, living richly in his kingdom."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph McGarry, "Formed While Following: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Asymmetrical View of Agency in Christian Formation," *Theology Today* 7, no. 1 (2014): 108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

Willard's perspective seems to resonate with Jesus's indictment of the Pharisees from Jerusalem: "their hearts are far from me" (Mk 7:6). Other passages reinforce this view. Jesus's teaching on being born again in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 is not an outwardly actionable imperative but rather an invitation that personally engages Nicodemus in the cognitive, reflective task of reframing and reestablishing his own identity in a formative way. Likewise, the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 invites the listeners to consider a new sense of belonging to others who were previously excluded from their view of the people of God. Of course, the point is to go and do likewise, but Jesus's approach to this teaching invites thoughtful participation in the conceptual work of formation first. What becomes clear in Jesus's approach to the formation of his disciples is that he was inviting them to step into their new reality in psychosocial ways just as they were stepping into it in concretely ethical and actionable ways. Jesus invited his disciples to discover their new identity in him even as they were discovering Jesus's true identity. Jesus invited his disciples to embrace their new belonging to one another as they discovered what it meant to belong to him. And Jesus invited his disciples to discover and embrace their new kingdom oriented calling and purpose even before they would be empowered by his Spirit to live it out.

Alongside the content of his teaching, the very ways that Jesus personally engaged his disciples makes clear his formative goals for their discipleship. Peter's earliest encounter with Jesus and invitation to follow him offers a multi-layered example of this. One of the first things that Jesus does with Peter, in John's account, is to offer him a new name: "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas (which, when translated, is Peter)" (Jn 1:42). Jesus acknowledges who Simon was, but immediately



confers on him an additional name with a new meaning that shifted and expanded his own sense of identity. It would be years before Peter would truly begin to grow into that new identity, but that process of growth toward a Christ-directed goal is in fact what defines discipleship. It is also out of this early encounter with Jesus that Peter and several other disciples were invited to follow Jesus together. Their response, as seen in Luke 5:11, was to pull their boats up onto shore, leave everything, and follow him.

Immediately Peter and the others left family, community, and vocation. In that movement, previously established connections of belonging were superseded by new ones for the sake of finding a new belonging with Jesus and with the community of those who would join in following him. Of course, that sense of belonging to Jesus and one another was not immediate, but would be developed and deepened in the years that followed. Finally, Jesus indicated a new purpose that their lives would take on as they followed him: “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people” (Lk 5:36). It is unlikely that Peter or the others immediately understood what Jesus meant by these words, but in the years that followed, they would live into their new kingdom oriented purpose as those who would draw other people into God’s kingdom. In examining just those initial interactions in which Jesus calls Peter and other disciples, it can be argued that Jesus made clear the essential transformative work that he would unfold in them as they walked with him and grew to know, love, and trust him: he would confer on them a new God-given identity, invite them into a new community of belonging, and offer them a new calling and purpose for their lives.

For a long time, Christian ministries, including those that have focused on youth, have articulated a goal for discipleship of helping people find their identity in Christ. As

Dean observed, “Christian identity is a stated goal of nearly all church youth programs.”<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on Christian discipleship, Steele affirmed the centrality of this task: “By the work of Jesus the Christ, humanity is called to a new identity... When we speak of Christian formation, we are speaking of the process of becoming what we were first intended to be and are now allowed to be by the justifying work of Christ.”<sup>43</sup> This is the development of a transformative identification with Christ—not merely in a conceptual way but in a living, active way. It means the disciple grows to be relationally redefined by learning to trust Jesus, believing what the gospel says about the meaning and value of his or her life, and taking on one’s allegiance to Christ as a self-defining attribute. In writing about the language of spiritual formation among Christian college students, Rhea argues for the centrality of the spiritual task, stating that knowing one’s identity in Christ is the most theological issue.<sup>44</sup> While the outworking of this new identity might be a gradual process, it is intended to be absolute and complete. This is clear in Paul’s explanation in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: the old has gone, the new is here.” Not only is the disciple a completely new creation as a result of being in Christ, but to Paul this new identity in Christ transcended with overriding importance all other aspects of normal social and natural personal identity: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is

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<sup>42</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>43</sup> Steele, *On the Way*, 23-24.

<sup>44</sup> Rob Rhea, “Exploring Spiritual Formation in the Christian Academy: The Dialectics of Church, Culture, and the Larger Integrative Task,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 1 (2011): 6.

there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).<sup>45</sup> Paul goes further, suggesting that his identity had in fact become that of Christ himself: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Scripture offers a great deal more to give content to the new identity that the disciple finds in Christ. The point here is the foundational significance of the spiritually formative task of finding one’s new identity in Christ. As Willard put it, “it is *who we are* in our thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and choices—in the inner life—that counts.”<sup>46</sup> A person’s concept of their own identity and personhood is the foundational location of Christ’s transformative work in a person’s discipleship.

A second goal or task of discipleship is for the disciple to find his or her new belonging in Christ. This new belonging includes the deep, personal connectedness to Christ that grows out the developing trust in him as one’s Lord and Savior. In fact, as the passages above point out, a disciple’s new identity comes from being “in Christ” or from one’s newly belonging to Christ. This new belonging also includes the connectedness to the body or community of Christ marked by mutually invested support and care. Jesus gave definitive importance to the quality and depth of interpersonal connectedness among the disciples when he said to them, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). Jesus makes it clear that this new belonging between disciples grows out of each one’s belonging to him. As Jesus prays to

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<sup>45</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Is Galatians Just a ‘Guy Thing?’: A Theological Reflection,” *Interpretation* 54, no. 3 (July 2000): 275.

<sup>46</sup> Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 24.

the Father for the unity he desires among his disciples he says, “I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity” (Jn 17:23). It is the disciples’ belonging to Christ that calls forth a new kind of connectedness and belonging to one another among them.

This new and radical sense of belonging found in Christ is made equally explicit in the writings of Paul. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul states, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.” From Paul’s understanding of Christ’s redemption, belonging included a kind of ownership as Christ lays claim to the disciple. In Paul’s use of the metaphor of the body, the disciple’s new connection to Christ, who is the head, means that they are now part of Christ’s body and therefore as a consequence belong to one another in a new way: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” This belonging as Paul explains is both a matter of external spiritual reality and internal recognition and choice. In 1 Corinthians 9:19, Paul writes, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” Here Paul takes upon himself a sense of belonging, not only to other present disciples but even to those he hopes will become disciples as a result. Throughout New Testament passages like these, the process of spiritual formation can be seen to include the central element of discovering and embracing this new kind of belonging in Christ.

Lastly, a third goal or task of discipleship is for the disciple to receive a new sense of vocation or calling in Christ. This is the disciple’s new sense of empowered purpose and potential to make a difference in God’s kingdom. There are several commissioning passages in the gospels that make it clear that to be a disciple of Christ is to step into the movement of God’s purposes and to participate in the work of the kingdom. The great

commission in Matthew 28 gives the clear sense that the end of Jesus's earthly ministry was the beginning of the disciple's ministry and that they were being entrusted with the responsibility to carry on the disciple-making work Jesus had begun with them. Similarly, Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:12, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." In John 20:21, Jesus tells his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Jesus made it clear that the lives of the disciples had purpose and impact of eternal significance. Jesus went on to explain that the significant purposes of the disciples' lives would be fulfilled only as a result of their ongoing connection to him: "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (Jn 15:5, 8). Paul echoed this theme that God has redeemed the disciple in part so that he or she might fulfill the things they were created to do: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:8, 10). All of these passages emphasize the significance of each disciple's active contribution to the mission of God empowered by the Spirit of Christ working in and through them. It is in this way that a person's autonomy finds its most meaningful expression and fulfillment.

These three spiritually formative tasks of discipleship—finding one's identity in Christ, finding one's belonging in Christ and in his body, and finding one's kingdom oriented autonomy in Christ—provide a simple but fundamental framework for understanding the most essential transformations that unfold in the life of discipleship. These high-level tasks or transformative goals encompass the teachings of Christ and

imperatives of Scripture in a broad way, bringing to the fore those commands that have long been viewed as overarching themes of discipleship: to be transformed (as in Rom 12:2); to love God and one another (as in Mt 22:36-40); and to serve God’s mission of making other disciples (as in Mt 28:19-20). These transformative goals give purpose and consequential significance to spiritual disciplines often associated with spiritual formation. They also provide valuable clarity for the guidance and evaluation of the work of ministry with adolescents. For example, in Kenda Creasy Dean’s critique of the shortcomings of efforts to disciple adolescents in contemporary American churches, she came very close to naming these overarching formative elements. Dean suggests that what is needed for adolescents to grow into a “consequential faith”—one that is transformative in the ways God intends—include “confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God’s purpose and hope.”<sup>47</sup> To the degree that confessing a creed is less about doctrinal beliefs and more about finding oneself uniquely within the realities of the gospel, Dean’s list is very close to the three formative tasks proposed here.

### **The Universal Questions and Eternal Answers that Shape an Adolescent**

This theological reflection on the essential transformative processes of discipleship has highlighted the ways in which Christian spiritual formation ultimately addresses the core developmental needs of adolescence. Simply put, the normative developmental tasks of adolescence essentially correspond to the formative spiritual tasks of discipleship. The adolescent search for identity corresponds to the need for the

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<sup>47</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

Christian disciple to find and embrace their new, God-given identity in Christ. The adolescent search for belonging corresponds to the biblical imperative that disciples must discover and embrace their new belonging to God in Christ and to the family of God, or community of faith. And the adolescent search for autonomy corresponds to the biblical perspective that it is in Christ that one finds the works God has created her or him to do, the impact that he or she is meant to have for the sake of God's kingdom, and his or her ultimate purpose in life. From that perspective, the significance of these developmental tasks is not merely that they reflect a sociological need imposed on adolescents by current social forces in the surrounding culture or a psychosocial need imposed by the adolescent's neurobiology. Rather, these deep, innate developmental drives should be seen as God's created means of pushing and guiding each person's growth toward the ultimate fulfillment and spiritual wholeness that can be found only in connection to Christ, who is God, who has written into the core of emerging humanity the universal questions of identity, belonging, and purpose, which can only be satisfied by eternal answers. As Frederick Buechner summed up with beautiful simplicity, "We search for a self to be. We search for other selves to love. We search for work to do."<sup>48</sup>

It is in these areas of convergence between the psychosocial and spiritual tasks of formation and development that the faithful praxis of ministry with adolescents must focus its energy. It is here that the deepest developmental needs of every adolescent resonate with the gospel's invitations to the life of discipleship. And it is here that discipleship will have enduring formative effectiveness. A biblically faithful approach to

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<sup>48</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 65.

adolescent discipleship that takes seriously the innate and contextual needs of this age group will bring the gospel's eternal answers to bear upon the universal questions God seems to have written into the adolescent developmental process. What is needed next is a deeper exploration of how most effectively to nurture identity, belonging, and autonomy through the ministry of Christian discipleship.



## CHAPTER 4

### NURTURING THE KEY DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF ADOLESCENCE FOR AND THROUGH CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Having now identified a set of developmental tasks that are normative for adolescence and having examined the prevalent external and internal developmental pressures that drive them, it is important to acknowledge that these do not indicate any certainty that most adolescents will successfully resolve these pivotal tasks in a healthy way. To the contrary, many of the discouraging statistics on adolescent well-being examined in chapter 2 indicate that a significant number of adolescents are not succeeding in negotiating and constructing a healthy sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. In particular, the rising levels of depression and anxiety among teens feeling overly stressed and profoundly isolated point to the fact that far too many teens are not receiving the nurture and support they need in these key areas of their development. Therefore, it is vital for an effective practical theology of adolescent discipleship to take into consideration findings of how these developmental processes can go awry and how certain forms of nurture and support can improve their outcomes. This is not merely a matter of helping young people to develop in psychologically and socially healthy ways.

This is a matter of supporting God's work in bringing adolescents into a wholeness and maturity that he intends for each person.

To nurture these key areas of development in teens, attention must be given to both the content and the context of their discipleship. In terms of content, Scripture has a great deal to say to young people in each of these areas, and a biblical worldview is foundational to every believer's understanding of his or her identity, belonging, and autonomy. Yet the context in which young people receive these biblical perspectives may be as influential as that content itself. Adolescents need the support of relationally invested adults, as well as peers, in their community of faith in order to experience for themselves the biblical truths intended to shape their lives. This balance between content and context can be seen in the approach Jesus took with his disciples. He spoke of God's love, and he demonstrated it tangibly. He explained their calling to take the message of the kingdom to others and then he sent them out empowered. He invited them to put their faith in him and continually gave them opportunities to do just that. The context Jesus created for his disciples always supported the content of his teaching. What he did with them always reinforced what he said to them. That same balance must be the goal for an approach to adolescent discipleship that strives to nurture these developmental processes today.

The key element in creating a context for adolescent discipleship that faithfully reflects the content of the gospel and that will most effectively nurture the development of their identity, belonging, and autonomy is the intentional social support offered by trusted adults who are personally and persistently invested in them. Newman and Newman define social support as "all those social experiences that lead people to believe

that they are cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belong to a network of communication and mutual obligation.”<sup>1</sup> As that definition suggests, social support can come through a variety of different kinds of interactions, but it is focused on expressing care, conferring worth, and building trustworthy connection. Several authors have cited a range of evidence that shows a connection between the social support adults offered adolescents through close personal relationships and developmental outcomes of physical and emotional well-being, higher measures of self-worth, and interpersonal competence.<sup>2</sup> The nurturing benefits of social support have implications for all three areas of development. Steele points out that when the faith community takes on this role of providing social support, it actually supports the essential tasks of Christian formation for adolescents: “From early to late adolescence the tasks of Christian formation are to develop a sense of belonging to the Christian community and to search in order to own one’s faith. These tasks can be assisted along the way if the faith community helps adolescents to develop a sense of competence and identity.”<sup>3</sup> In each of these areas of spiritual and personal formation, the role of that support and the particular ways to most effectively leverage that support for nurture must be explored further.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara M. Newman and Philip R. Newman, “Group Identity and Alienation: Give the We Its Due,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 30, no. 5 (October 2001): 532.

<sup>2</sup> Newman and Newman, “Group Identity and Alienation,” 532; Brett Laursen, Wyndol Furman, and Karen Mooney, “Predicting Interpersonal Competence and Self-Worth from Adolescent Relationships and Relationship Networks: Variable-Centered and Person-Centered Perspectives,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (July 2006): 573.

<sup>3</sup> Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 153.

## **Nurturing Adolescent Identity Formation within Christian Discipleship**

The goal of nurturing identity formation in the context of adolescent discipleship is to help young people discover and develop a coherent and enduring sense of who they are in Christ. Unfortunately, several challenges can impede the adolescent's process of developing an authentic and enduring sense of identity. In fact, a certain degree of struggle in this process was recognized early on by Erikson as not only unavoidable but even necessary in the developmental process: "Thus, we have learned to ascribe a normative 'identity crisis' to the age of adolescence and young adulthood."<sup>4</sup> A normative crisis implies a certain measure of healthy conflict and challenge that every adolescent should be expected to face through the process of exploring, testing, claiming, and consolidating the elements of a self-concept that constitute an authentic and enduring sense of one's self. On the other hand, for many the crisis is experienced as anything but normative, and there are many factors that can hinder its healthy resolution.

For those who are called to support the discipleship of adolescents and recognize the central importance of identity formation as a part of that discipleship, it is vital to understand the detrimental factors that tend to hinder healthy identity formation as well as the conditions key to nurturing it. Most of these contributing factors, both negative and supportive, are tied to the relational context surrounding the individual. Because a person's identity is so profoundly unique to each person, it would be easy to assume that it develops entirely within the individual. However, the opposite is true. Erikson understood the process of identity formation to be a relationally oriented one—so much

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<sup>4</sup> Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 17.

so that he described the interplay between the psychological and social factors as a “psychosocial relativity.”<sup>5</sup> This connection to the social environment makes the process of identity formation dependent on the healthy support of that surrounding social environment—a dependency that deserves the full attention of those who would seek to support it.

One of the ways that an adolescent’s social context can impede or derail the process of healthy identity formation is described by James Marcia’s term, identity foreclosure. Building on Erikson’s work, Marcia developed a tool to categorize a person’s identity development into one of four statuses. Marcia’s identity foreclosure status describes a person with a high degree of commitment to a particular identity, but this commitment is to an identity that was imposed by an external authority rather than one that has been explored and constructed for one’s self: “He is becoming what others have prepared or intended him to become as a child. His beliefs (or lack of them) are virtually ‘the faith of his fathers living still’...one feels that if he were faced with a situation in which parental values were nonfunctional, he would feel extremely threatened.”<sup>6</sup> For those in identity foreclosure, healthy identity exploration has been precluded by a prescribed identity being forced upon these individuals by a parent or other social influence. This has important implications for the work of supporting Christian discipleship among adolescents. Parents or ministry leaders who intend to help

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<sup>5</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Marcia, “Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3 (May 1966): 552.

young people develop a faith identity and discover a sense of who they are in Christ may unintentionally push adolescents into a foreclosed identity if their guidance puts demands on adolescents that limit their sense of freedom to explore other identities, even contrary ones. Naturally, an identity that is imposed, and therefore “foreclosed,” is not authentic to the individual and therefore will not endure.

To foster healthy identity exploration, adolescents need what Erikson, Marcia, and many more recent authors have termed a period of “moratorium.”<sup>7</sup> Moratorium, used in this way, refers to the social space, time, and freedom adolescents need to be able to explore different aspects of their potential sense of self and then to integrate these into a meaningful whole. It is a cessation of intrusive demands on the adolescent’s identity, a break from imposed conformity to who parents and other key adults expect the teen to be. In the context of ministry, providing this psychosocial moratorium for adolescents means guarding them from unintentional pressures to conform to culturally defined expressions of Christian identity, offering presence and care that feels genuinely unconditional, responding to inconsistencies in behavior with gracious understanding, and simply being careful to present the gospel as an invitation rather than a demand.

Another important way in which the influences of the relational context most clearly impinge on adolescent identity development is in the ways that inconsistencies between multiple relational contexts solicit the formation of multiple differing versions of the individual’s sense of self. While it might seem most natural to think of a person’s

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<sup>7</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 128; Marcia, “Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status,” 558; and Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., “Time and Identity: A Framework for Research and Theory Formation,” 370-400.

identity or sense of self as a singular entity, the reality consistently observed—especially during adolescence—is the development of multiple selves. This multiplicity results from the ways that the larger social context around the adolescent introduces divergent fracturing pressures into the process of identity formation. The fragmentation of the adolescent’s social world into countless distinct social environments pulls the adolescent in different directions, demands different competencies, solicits different patterns of response and interaction, calls for conformity to different norms of behavior, and expects different versions of the individual to be present in different relational settings. This is the reality that most teens experience as they shift from home to peer group, from one classroom environment to another, from school to sports team, from one online social platform to another, from leisure activities to a work environment, and then back to home again. Each environment expects the adolescent to present a particular version of his or her self and each has a unique shaping influence on his or her identity.

Susan Harter has offered perhaps the most comprehensive study of the construction of multiple selves in the developmental process, and she notes that this feature of the identity formation process is now broadly acknowledged by most contemporary theorists.<sup>8</sup> Harter also insightfully points out the natural tension this multiplicity of selves creates within the developmental process, as new cognitive levels of self-awareness and social-awareness push the adolescent to conform to differing social expectations while at the same time pushing him or her to struggle toward a consistent, coherent sense of self:

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self: Developmental and Sociocultural Foundations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012), 1-8.

During adolescence, the emergence of abstract thinking, introspection, and self-reflection move self-representations to a new level in that the teenager is compelled to differentiate his/her attributes into multiple, role-related selves. Simultaneously, the developing cognitive apparatus compels the individual to attempt to integrate these differing self-attributes into a coherent and consistent self-theory...However, those in midadolescence do not yet possess the cognitive skills to create such an integrated self-portrait...At this particular developmental juncture, this multiplicity, in turn, provokes concern and confusion over which is the real self.<sup>9</sup>

This concern and confusion that adolescents experience in their struggle to consolidate an identity in the midst of this multiplicity of selves calls for the patient understanding and support of those walking alongside them through this process. It is not, however, a process that should be circumvented or rushed. The benefit of constructing multiple selves is that it offers the adolescent the kind of identity exploration that Erikson indicated when he was pointing to the adolescent's need for a moratorium. In that way, it can be viewed as both normative and necessary.

One liability arising from the construction of multiple selves is what Harter calls "false-self behavior." When adolescents find themselves pressured to conform to expectations that do not match their sense of who they see themselves to be, there is a certain consciousness of the incongruity or inauthenticity that provokes internal frustration or emotional distress. Again, these reflective and behavioral patterns are influenced by the relational context, and the more intimate the relationship, the more profound its influence. Therefore, as Harter points out, with false-self behaviors, parents or close, trusted adults play a key influential role: "Our own findings...reveal that unhealthy levels of false-self behavior are particularly likely to emerge if caregivers make

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<sup>9</sup> Harter, *The Construction of the Self*, 14.



their approval conditional upon the young adolescent living up to unrealistic standards of behavior.”<sup>10</sup> This presents an important caution to those who want to nurture the development of a Christian identity of young people. As is likely all too common in church settings, a ministry leader may unintentionally offer what feels like conditional approval as they impose expectations on an adolescent’s behavior that he or she might not feel capable of fulfilling. The result will not nurture healthy identity formation in the discipleship process but rather solicit the presentation of a transient false self.

The second concern associated with the construction of multiple selves is about the adolescent’s consolidation of these divergent identities into a unified cohesive self. This is a process that adults can support and nurture if they offer patient understanding of the process rather than reacting to inconsistencies in adolescent self-representations in ways that heighten the conflict and tensions the adolescent already feels over these discrepancies. While Harter and several other writers she cites clearly point to this consolidation of a single, consistent, enduring identity as the healthy outcome for adolescent development, she also points out that a number of contemporary sociologists have begun to suggest that as society becomes increasingly fragmented and pluralistic, the goal of developing a stable, integrated identity might not even be realistic or advantageous.<sup>11</sup>

The increasing fragmentation and pluralism of American society immerses young people in an overwhelming and inconsistent array of demands, opinions, expectations,

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<sup>10</sup> Harter, *The Construction of the Self*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

values, beliefs and life-style choices. Two sociologists in particular, Kenneth Gergen and Robert Lifton, have pointed out the effects these post-modern sociological forces are having on the process of identity formation. As Gergen describes the present situation, “The postmodern condition more generally is marked by a plurality of voices vying for the right to reality—to be accepted as legitimate expressions of the true and the good.”<sup>12</sup> Gergen made that observation even before the explosion of online social networks and the now pervasive intrusion of social media into young people’s lives. While Gergen expresses concern that the “over-populating” and “saturating” influences of these divergent forces could in effect disintegrate the self entirely,<sup>13</sup> Lifton suggests that the resulting fluidity of self poses an advantage to individuals in a post-modern culture.<sup>14</sup> This fatalistic surrender of the self in the face of these postmodern factors, however, is a radical contradiction of a biblical view of unified personhood, as well as a contradiction of countless biblical imperatives to stand against shifting cultural influences that undermine the Christian’s singular grounding in his or her relationship to God.

Just as the influences of social context can hinder healthy identity formation, those contextual influences can also nurture it. That is precisely the hope of those in ministry that seek to nurture the adolescent’s development of identity in the context of Christian discipleship. There are three elements to this supportive context that will make it most effective. First, it is vital that adolescents have a stable set of relationships with

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 8-9.

trusted adults who provide the social support needed for healthy identity formation. It is vital for older Christians, who have established their own strong sense of their identity in Christ, to express ongoing acceptance and affirmation of who they see the adolescent becoming both in terms of their unique qualities and in terms of their shared status as beloved children of God.

Second, ministry leaders need to offer a supportive moratorium for adolescent identity exploration. The context of time spent with ministry leaders needs to be perceived by the adolescent as a safe social space where they can be free to express different aspects of who they are without fear of negative evaluation or pressure to conform, even if aspects of the selves they share are perceived to be contrary to Christian norms. The more consistently adults can express unconditional acceptance to adolescents, the more effectively they will nurture the identity formation process.

And third, those who are offering adolescents intentional social support in the discipleship process can support the gradual consolidation of multiple selves into a coherent identity through a consistency of connection over time that can help to reflect some elements of the adolescent's sameness through the changes of various identity explorations. Here too, the theological perspective that highlights the God-given aspects of personal identity and the view that God knows his children even before they know themselves will support this consolidation process.

In addition to these elements that create a supportive context for nurturing Christian identity formation, Scripture offers a wealth of content that should guide and inform adolescents' search for identity. Young people need to consider the meaning of the biblical truth that they were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). They need to

reflect on the reality that they are fully known by God (Ps 139). They need to hear that they are valued by God and therefore were redeemed at great cost to God (1 Pt 1:18-19). They need to deepen their confidence in the security of God's love for them, even as they are not sure yet whether they are lovable (Rom 8:38-39). They need to hear that they are children of God who will ultimately be made like Christ when he appears (1 Jn 3:2). They need to consider God's perspective that in Christ they are a new creation (1 Cor 5:17). They need to ponder the promise that Christ has a new name for them in eternity (Rv 2:17). All of these biblical truths offer profound support to adolescents seeking to discover who they are in Christ, and bringing these perspectives into the discipleship process provides the theological grounding that directs it toward the outcome God intends for each person.

### **Nurturing Adolescent Belonging within Christian Discipleship**

There are two goals for nurturing a secure sense of belonging among adolescents in the context of their discipleship. The first is to help them find the relational security they need for their emotional well-being and healthy development into adulthood. In this sense, it is through Christian discipleship that the church has the opportunity to provide for a fundamental need of adolescents. The second goal is to help adolescents find their truest belonging, theologically speaking, in relationship with God and in relationship with the Church, to which he or she is called by God to belong. In this sense, it is for the sake of Christian discipleship that the church must nurture adolescent belonging.

Insights from attachment theory make it clear why these relational connections offered as social support are so important to young people and why some young people

have internalized obstacles that impair their ability to secure that support for themselves. Many of the features of a teenager's social life, including strengths and deficiencies in their interpersonal skills, have been shaped by early family influences. Patterns of attachment between parent and child experienced as early as the first year of life have been found to profoundly influence how people relate to others later in life.<sup>15</sup> If those early attachments are secure, the individual is set up with beneficial social assets for his or her search for belonging in adolescence. If those early attachments were weak or disordered, the individual is far more likely to struggle socially in adolescence. It is important for ministry leaders to understand that some adolescents will need much more help than others in securing the social support they need. In spite of the social liabilities that some adolescents possess, however, the good news is that research has shown that a person's working mental model of attachment can be altered and improved by secure attachments later in life, as Siegel explains:

changing conditions will change a child's, adolescent's, or adult's working model of attachment as development unfolds across the lifespan. Patterns established early in life have a major impact on functioning, but the individual's experiences continue to influence the internal model of attachment. This suggests that new relationship experiences have the potential to move individuals toward a more secure state of mind with respect to attachment.<sup>16</sup>

This is where members of the church community have a profound opportunity to impact the lives of adolescents. It is during adolescence in particular that young people are most open to forming those new attachments. Scharf and Mayseless explain that as adolescents

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012), 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-100.

decrease their dependencies on parent attachments, those attachment functions—especially helping regulate negative emotions and providing a secure base—are transferred from parents to a broader set of sources including not only peers but other adults such as those serving in the context of ministry.<sup>17</sup>

Reliable, caring, personally invested adults in the congregation can offer teens experiences of attachment that will provide them with a secure base from which to explore and engage their world and potentially improve patterns of connecting for the rest of their lives. Reflecting on both the plasticity of the developing adolescent brain and the powerful influence of emotional relationships, Siegel suggests that these kinds of meaningful relationships have profound potential for developmental interventions in young people: “A major theme of attachment research and effective treatment studies is that intervention via the medium of the attachment relationship is the most productive approach to creating lasting and meaningful results.”<sup>18</sup> This emphasizes the transformative power of social support when it offers adolescents secure attachments.

Of course, the nature and qualities of the relationships young people experience with supportive adults in the congregation will determine whether the social support a congregation offers has the impact it intends. Siegel points out that the key in these supportive attachments is a pattern of communication that is contingent, collaborative,

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<sup>17</sup> Miri Scharf and Ofra Mayseless, “Putting Eggs in More Than One Basket: A New Look at Developmental Processes of Attachment in Adolescence,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 117 (Fall 2007): 7.

<sup>18</sup> Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 114.

and attuned.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the adult who wants to offer the adolescent a source of secure attachment needs to listen well, be sensitive to the mental and emotional states of the young person, and reflect that sensitivity back both with words and with nonverbal cues in order to help the young person feel heard, understood, and supported.

Research on youth mentoring offers additional insights into the qualities of relational engagement that are most supportive of teens. After studying adolescents and adults in a variety of mentoring relationships, Spencer identified four traits that were consistent in those relationships that were most successful: emotional engagement, empathy, collaboration, and companionship.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, several traits of what Karcher and Nakkula refer to as the “developmental style” of mentoring clarify elements of relational engagement with adolescents that focus on their developmental needs: “the relationship is viewed as a conduit through which the mentor influences the mentee’s skill, internal characteristics, and emotional well-being... the mentor is consistently youth focused and collaborative.”<sup>21</sup> This is not to suggest that these supportive relationships are simply a means to an end. The relationship itself is the most valuable and influential gift an adult mentor can give a young person.

While such close personal relationships with adolescents offer the greatest potential for support and nurture, there is also great value in the broader context for

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<sup>19</sup> Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Renee Spencer, “Understanding the Mentoring Process between Adolescents and Adults,” *Youth & Society* 37 (January 2006): 287-314.

<sup>21</sup> Micahel J. Karcher and Michael J. Nakkula, “Youth Mentoring with a Balanced Focus, Shared Purpose, and Collaborative Interactions,” *New Directions for Youth Development* 126 (Summer 2010): 26.

looser forms of relational belonging that congregations may also offer adolescents.

Granovetter points out that it is not just the intense individual relationships that benefit people, and he argues for the importance of what he calls “weak ties” within a person’s social network because of the beneficial opportunities they make available to the individual and because of the ways they contribute to larger scale social cohesion.<sup>22</sup>

These lesser forms of social capital should not be overlooked, because a congregation has a breadth of resources to offer adolescents through these looser connections with its members if the church is truly functioning as a welcoming community to young people.

Lastly, the overall social support a congregation offers adolescents can be strengthened if it can build connections between the various personal and group sources of relational support it provides. Noam and Fiore found that connections between the different social spheres teens inhabit strengthens the support they receive from them: “adolescents benefit from efforts to help them bridge the many worlds they inhabit, institutionally and interpersonally.”<sup>23</sup> In the context of a congregation this bridging between “worlds” is possible if adolescents are invited to belong to more of the congregation than just its youth group. Encouraging young people to join regularly in the corporate worship gatherings of the entire congregation, inviting them to find places to serve and take on appropriate leadership roles in different areas of the church, and ensuring that they feel welcomed and known by adult leaders as well as peers in the youth ministry draws young people into multiple social contexts for belonging. The

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<sup>22</sup> Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1378.

<sup>23</sup> Noam and Fiore, “Relationships Across Multiple Settings,” 10.



advantage here is that if these contexts are all part of a congregation, then the opportunity to build bridges between those contexts is tremendous.

This is the same supportive principal Coleman observed in what he termed “intergenerational closure.”<sup>24</sup> This social network closure exists when the adults who care for two or more relationally connected youth are themselves relationally connected. This added layer of connectedness brings a consistency into the influences of these adults on the lives of these adolescents. Coleman explained, “However much closure there may be in the youth community... it is the absence of intergenerational closure that prevents the human capital that exists among the adults from playing a role in the lives of the youth. This lack of intergenerational closure constitutes the missing social capital that we have identified earlier as resulting in tangible losses for young persons.”<sup>25</sup> Research by Fletcher et al. verified that this kind of connection between different social contexts offers young people higher levels of social support and results in higher measures of well-being than they would gain from them separately.<sup>26</sup> Christian Smith found the same effects of network closure among adolescents specifically in the context of religious congregations.<sup>27</sup> Those adults in the congregation working most closely with adolescents must facilitate the connections with other supportive adults that will result in this

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<sup>24</sup> James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 226.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-227.

<sup>26</sup> Anne C. Fletcher et al., “Social Network Closure and Child Adjustment,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (October 2001): 500-527.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Smith, “Religious Participation and Network Closure Among American Adolescents,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 259-267.

intergenerational network closure. In practical terms, this can be as simple as a conversation between two adults that are connected to a teen about the needs and the development they are observing in the teen.

In summary, the context of nurturing adolescent belonging is in many ways the very content of what the church hopes for them to discover. Therefore, the supportive relationships that adults in the congregation build with teens are not means to an end. Those reliable, secure, nurturing relationships are in fact what adolescents need. These relationships will offer the greatest support when they are attentively attuned to the emotional states of teens. And these close, personal mentoring relationships exist within a broader context of connections and group associations that will also support an adolescent's search for belonging. These sources of relational attachments a congregation offers its young people have the potential to transform them even at the level of their mental functioning because adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to emotionally significant relationships in the midst of its plasticity in brain development.

The discipleship of teens must nurture their sense of belonging, not merely for their psychosocial well-being and healthy development into adulthood, but because they do in fact belong, in the most profound sense. Introducing adolescents to God as a real source of secure attachment may have the greatest influence of all. Even before they come to believe that truth for themselves, the context in which that truth is shared, the supportive relationships described here, will help to make it more believable for them. In the midst of all the relational insecurities that adolescents experience in their families and in their peer groups, God is the strongest and most trustworthy source of secure

attachment they could ever find. Scripture has much to say to adolescents about their ultimate source of belonging.

Adolescents need to hear what Scripture says about their belonging to God and to his people. They need to hear that they were chosen by God, redeemed in Christ, and loved unconditionally. They need to hear the biblical perspective that they are “children of God” (Jn 1:12), not just because they were created by God but because they have been adopted by God: “the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship” (Rom 8:15). They need to reflect on the inescapability of God’s presence in their lives: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Ps 139). They need to be taught the security of their connection in Christ: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (Jn 10:28-29). They need to be reminded that no matter how far from God they once were or once thought they were, they have now been brought near to Him: “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:12-13). They need to understand their place in the church, not on a human institutional level but on the eternal level as members of the body of Christ: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27). These biblical perspectives need to be shared with adolescents in a context that gives them tangible expression in order to help young people find their belonging in Christ and in his Church.

### **Nurturing Adolescent Autonomy within Christian Discipleship**

Finally, one of the goals of nurturing autonomy in the context of adolescent discipleship is to help young people successfully navigate their way from their childhood dependence on parents through a process of individuation that results in a healthy adult interdependence with others. The social support that adults in the congregation can offer adolescents in this process can affirm their growing independence while supporting ongoing connections that encourage interdependence. The other goal in nurturing adolescent autonomy as a part of Christian discipleship is to help teens find the value of their contributions to the community of faith and the mission of God and even ultimately to find their God-given sense of purpose and calling in life. To this end, the support of a congregation needs to focus on helping students to see themselves as real actors in God's story, full-fledged members of the community of faith, and empowered agents in God's mission. In practical terms, the congregation needs to invite adolescents into meaningful opportunities to contribute, serve, and lead that match their growing skills and levels of maturity.

Two primary obstacles hinder the development of autonomy among adolescents. The first is that their social environment is often less than welcoming of their attempts to exert their autonomy. As Zimmerman and Cleary point out, most adolescents struggle to develop a sense of personal agency because they encounter countless obstacles that make

the world around them feel resistant or unwelcoming of their attempted contributions.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, adolescents want to have an impact beyond themselves and make a difference in the larger world. The second obstacle hindering the development of adolescent autonomy is simply the timing of the internal developmental assets that equip their autonomy. In simplest terms, their drive toward independence, agency, and contribution to larger causes precedes some cognitive developments needed to make it successful. The development of autonomy and of the competence to make decisions and take actions to direct one's own life and to contribute to others' lives requires four key capacities that Bandura identifies as intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-examination.<sup>29</sup> While many adolescents display the motivation and even passion to engage in purposeful contributions to adult activities and social causes, they will still operate reactively and impulsively until maturity brings the skill for intentional, thoughtful action. It is during adolescence that the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex in the brain are developing, bringing new capacities to self-regulate and plan for future oriented action. This growing but underdeveloped capacity for executive functioning calls for the understanding and patient coaching of adults who wish to help adolescents develop their autonomy in the context of discipleship.

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<sup>28</sup> Barry J. Zimmerman and Timothy J. Cleary, "Adolescent's Development of Personal Agency: The Role of Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Self-Regulatory Skill," in *Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Adolescents*, eds. Frank Pajares and Timothy C. Urdan (Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2005), 45.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Bandura, "Adolescent Development from an Agentic Perspective," in *Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Adolescents*, eds. Frank Pajares and Timothy C. Urdan (Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, 2005), 3.

One of the most important ways to support the development of autonomy in adolescence is by strengthening their beliefs about their own competence. Albert Bandura underscores the importance of these beliefs. “Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. This core belief is the foundation of human motivation, well-being, and accomplishments... Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to effect change by one’s actions.”<sup>30</sup> Toward that end, Zimmerman and Cleary identify three factors that enhance a young person’s perception of their self-efficacy: experiences of personal mastery or meaningful accomplishment, encouraging feedback given by people close to them, and the modeling of others they identify with who have shown achievable success in something they want to undertake.<sup>31</sup> These present clear directives for those providing intentional social support to nurture adolescent autonomy.

Adolescents need opportunities to contribute that are not only meaningful but attainable for their level of maturity and skill. To offer young people experiences of successful accomplishment, adults should be committed to partnering with them. Service opportunities that empower adolescents to contribute to projects that have visibly lasting impact as well as enough support to ensure success offer the greatest potential for building their sense of efficacy. In the midst of that work, adults need to offer ongoing affirmation and encouragement, as well as constructive coaching.

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<sup>30</sup> Bandura, “Adolescent Development from an Agentic Perspective,” 3.

<sup>31</sup> Zimmerman and Cleary, “Adolescent’s Development of Personal Agency Skill,” 45.

Again, the social context of relational support is as important here as it is in nurturing other aspects of adolescent development. Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins identified several aspects of relational support that are most effective in nurturing autonomy in adolescents: respect for beliefs, feelings, and ideas of adolescents; encouragement to develop a point of view; freedom for the adolescent to disagree and argue their opinion; opportunities for joint decision making with adults; encouragement of self-initiation, acceptance of individuality, freedom for independent problem-solving, and importantly, the absence of attempts to assert power or exert control over adolescents.<sup>32</sup> Those working with adolescents need to have these supportive strategies in mind. The challenge in doing so is that when the goal in discipleship is to see young people becoming more Christ-like, it may be difficult for supportive adults to truly give them the freedom to own and express points of view on spiritual matters that are contrary to Scripture or to those points of view held by these adults. Especially where strong supportive relationships have been built, the fear of jeopardizing that connection may prevent a teen from feeling the freedom to work through contrary points of view. It is therefore important for ministry leaders working with adolescents to invite and encourage appropriate disagreement among teens to nurture their autonomy and help them to genuinely own their beliefs, decisions, and actions. Moran et al. add the insight that because autonomy involves the development of self-regulation, it is important that those who want to provide support to this development “cannot direct or control, but rather must respond and scaffold so that the young person’s own psychological self-regulation

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<sup>32</sup> Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins, “Autonomy Development During Adolescence,” 186.

can develop.”<sup>33</sup> That may prove to be a difficult line to walk for adults supporting teens, but simply being aware of this concern will likely help most leaders avoid the tendency to be overbearing in their coaching and encouragement.

There is a great deal in Scripture that calls forth a young person’s autonomy. Adolescents struggling to exert their autonomy need to hear Paul’s encouragement to Timothy: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tm 4:12). They also need to learn that they are uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to make unique contributions to the community and that with that giftedness they play an indispensable role as a unique member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7, 12-31). They need to consider how Jesus’s parable of the bags of gold addresses the importance of the opportunities God has entrusted to them (Mt 25:14-30). They need to hear how much God cares about the needs around them and even ponder how they might serve Christ by serving others in need (Mt 25:31-46). And teens need to receive Jesus’ words of commissioning and sending (Mt 10:18; 28:18-20; Jn 20:21; Acts 1:8). These passages of Scripture and others like them demonstrate the uniqueness of each adolescent’s place in God’s kingdom and unique role in God’s purposes and mission, all of which affirm their sense of developing autonomy and purpose in Christ.

The social support that caring, personally invested adults offer to adolescents is crucial for their personal and spiritual development. As adults seek to nurture a young

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<sup>33</sup> Seana Moran, Matthew J. Bundick, Heather Malin, and Timothy S. Reilly, “How Supportive of Their Specific Purposes Do Youth Believe Their Family and Friends Are?,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28 (April 2013): 353.



person's identity, belonging, and autonomy as a part of their discipleship, it is not enough to offer key biblical passages and perspectives that address those areas of spiritual formation. It is equally important that their support creates the right kind of relational context for that development, and this supportive context must be offered not just by one or two committed adults but by the church as a whole.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SHIFT NEEDED TO NURTURE DISCIPLESHIP AMONG TODAY'S ADOLESCENTS

In order for adolescents to thrive in their development, both spiritually and psychosocially, what they need above all else is a high level of social support, the kind of long-term, relationally invested support that comes not just from parents and family members, but from a broader community of caring adults who are willing to offer consistent, welcoming, affirming connectedness. As has already been discussed, most adolescents in the current social context of American culture do not have access to that kind of support. Many institutions of American society that were originally focused on providing that support no longer offer the same kinds of care and nurture they once did. This loss of social capital leaves even the most affluent adolescents bankrupt of the relational resources they need to develop a healthy identity, belonging, and autonomy.

This sociological reality presents the church in America with an incredible opportunity to offer young people something vitally important. A congregation committed to serving the needs of adolescents among them has the opportunity to become the community of support that they are utterly lacking but desperately needing. Adolescents need to be embraced by a community of faith that values them—not just in a

strategic sense as a measure of the church's success but in the personal sense, as friends, brothers, sisters. They need to be valued genuinely for who they are becoming. Young people need trusted older brothers and sisters who offer a stable social context where they can be known, cared for, and encouraged; they need a place to belong. Adolescents need opportunities to contribute to the shared mission of the church at a variety of levels, even in some forms of leadership, where they can get a sense of their own significance; they need a chance to make a difference. For the church to fulfill its mission in the discipleship of its young people, offering this kind of engaging and supportive community to young people is not just an opportunity but a necessity. Otherwise, a congregation cannot hope to fulfill its calling to effectively nurture the discipleship and development of its youth into the kind of spiritual and personal wholeness in adulthood that God intends for every person.

Sadly, as discussed in chapter 1, most evangelical congregations in North America do not seem equipped to offer the breadth of support that adolescents need for their personal and spiritual development and to effectively engage them in a life of discipleship in the Christian community. And as the needs of adolescent development and discipleship have come into greater focus through the discussions of chapters 3 and 4, the picture of what is missing from most of these congregations is becoming clearer. In order to provide what is needed for the spiritual formation of its people, especially of its adolescents, the church needs to offer more than teaching and programs that will inform and instruct that development. It needs to offer the genuine spiritual community that will nurture that development. In other words, it is not enough for the church to offer the right

content to shape a lasting discipleship; it must offer—or even become—the right context for that discipleship.

If those two elements have become divorced from one another in the life and ministry of the church, it signals not so much a loss of mission or purpose, but a loss of identity for the church itself. The church's role in the mission of God should be inseparable from its identity as the people of God, but it is the latter that seems to have been gradually eroded by the influences of American society. It is this collective, communal identity that the church needs to reclaim for itself in order to offer adolescents the community of support they need.

### **God's Intentions for the Church as the Nurturing Context for Spiritual and Psychosocial Development**

Throughout Scripture's narrative of salvation history there is a corporate dimension to how God addresses his people. While God addresses and relates to individuals, God also addresses and relates to vast numbers of people as a singular entity. From the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12, God makes clear the intention not just to bless Abraham but to make Abraham into a nation and to bless all the peoples on Earth through him. When God calls Moses in Exodus 3, it is in response to seeing and hearing the shared misery of God's people. Throughout the Old Testament, both accusations of guilt and promises of blessings are addressed not just to individuals but to the people of Israel as a singular community. In Matthew 16, Jesus speaks not of calling individuals as he does elsewhere but of building his church. Most of Paul's epistles are addressed to congregations, not individuals. Even in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus speaks separately to the seven churches, but each is addressed as a singular, unified community. This consistent

attention to community reveals something about God's intentions for humanity and human development. Through all of this it is clear that God chooses primarily to use a people as the context for forming a person.

Today, with a pervasive culture that is so extensively individualistic, it is likely difficult for any American to fully grasp what they have been unable to appropriate from these biblical perspectives. The collectivism of the people throughout the Bible is an aspect of culture that is completely foreign to the dominant American experience today. Yet, in order for the church to fulfill its mission with its youngest members, it is vital that the church reclaim a biblically communal vision for its own identity.

### **Reclaiming a Communal Ecclesiology: The Church as God's Adoptive Family**

The average church attendee does not think about ecclesiology directly or intentionally, but it is certainly a part of his or her thinking. Everyone brings to the church impressions and assumptions about what a church is and ought to be. Everyone holds some vision for the purpose of the church and the role it should play in his or her life, and the way a person thinks about church has huge implications for their participation.

The life of the church is not shaped by the priorities of its leaders as much as by the assumptions and attitudes of the average person in the congregation. The way he or she understands the meaning and purpose of the church shapes how he or she will engage with the church, the place of priority and influence the church will have in his or her life, and the filters with which sermons will be heard, interpreted, and applied.

As a people idealistically defined by a commitment to Scripture, the American evangelical church ought to hold an ecclesiology shaped by Scripture more than by

anything else. In reality, however, the culture around it has done more to shape and influence the assumptions and views of the church than most congregants realize. As a consequence, what can be seen in churches is to a great degree a reflection of what can be seen in the culture around them. Rah shares this very critique of the American evangelical church: “For most of its history (but particularly in the last fifty years), American evangelicalism has more accurately reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture. At times, the evangelical church has been indistinguishable from Western, white American culture.”<sup>1</sup>

If the ecclesiology of the evangelical church in America has been influenced, even subtly, by the prevailing trends of the larger culture around it, then the most significant two influences among those trends must be the individualism and consumerism that define the contemporary mindset in American society. American individualism, in particular, has been highlighted as a corrupting element that has slipped into the theological self-understanding of Christian disciples, individually, and of the contemporary church, as a whole.

The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces Christian faith to a personal, private and individual faith.<sup>2</sup>

Guernsey makes this same observation: “The last half of the twentieth century has become an era of heightened individualism... Within a year most pastors have preached

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<sup>1</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

on the dangers of individualism and narcissism. However, the influence of these two go far deeper than grist for sermons. Both individualism and narcissism infect our view of the Church.”<sup>3</sup> Clark expresses a similar concern for the influence of this individualism on the church: “We, as Christians influenced by American mainstream culture, have bought into a faith system an ethos that deifies the cultural push for independence and self-sufficiency. The story of the Good News is not about my fulfillment but rather the invitation to step into the grand stream of God’s story. The Bible calls us to live as a community, a body, and a family.”<sup>4</sup> Karkkainen offers this same assessment of the contemporary culture’s impact on the ecclesiology being lived out in the church today: “The church of the third millennium finds itself amidst a culture that has become nothing but a meeting place for individual wills.”<sup>5</sup> Sadly, the result of this individualism is not only a distorted ecclesiology that weakens the church’s mission, but also a church full of lonely and quietly dissatisfied disciples.

Closely connected to the individualism of American culture is the consumer mindset. The consumerism of contemporary culture distorts Christianity on several levels, but where it most undermines ecclesiology is in the core of a person’s motivation for participating in the church. As consumers, people come to a church to receive goods and services rather than to offer themselves to one another and to invest in God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis B. Guernsey, *A New Design for Family Ministry* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing, 1985), 98.

<sup>4</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 188.

<sup>5</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 228.

purposes for a shared life and mission. The effect of this cultural influence is most clearly seen, as Rah points out, in the phenomenon commonly referred to as “church shopping.”

American evangelicalism has created the unique phenomenon of church shopping—viewing church as yet another commodity and product to be evaluated and purchased. When a Christian family moves to a new city, how much of the standards by which they choose a church is based upon a shopping list of their personal tastes and wants rather than their commitment to a particular community or their desire to serve a particular neighborhood? Churches, in turn, have adapted their ministries to appeal to the consumer mindset of the American public.<sup>6</sup>

Consumerism undermines community in the church, because it contributes to transience as the dissatisfied choose to disengage, and because it predisposes people to approach the church as recipients rather than contributors. The result is that most of the people in American congregations have an unexamined view of the church that sees it primarily as a place they can go to have their personal spiritual needs met. The fact that there are others sitting next to them in worship is naturally understood as a matter of practical expediency—a means to deliver the same “service” to as many customers as possible at the same time. A consumeristic cultural perspective means that congregants are not coming together to offer themselves to the church for each other’s sake, but rather they are gathering together merely to get the same thing for each of themselves. With this mindset, church participation has become predominantly self-serving, albeit spiritual, rather than self-offering.

It is not just recent influences from contemporary culture that have influenced this. The contemporary church has also inherited a theological heritage that leans it toward a very individualistic approach to faith. Among evangelicals, the historical emphasis on personal salvation often results in an unconscious neglect of the conception

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<sup>6</sup> Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 55.



of the church as a corporate entity living together in relation to God. Hart describes this piece of theological heritage as “the evangelical proclivity for personal piety over its corporate alternatives, for egalitarian over hierarchical structures, and for divine immediacy over human mediation in the experience and reception of grace,”<sup>7</sup> all of which contribute to a diminished value for the role of the community of faith in one’s life. With a highly individualistic view of the Christian life, it is inevitable that the church would be seen as little more than a collective of individuals separately pursuing their own personal spiritual growth.

All of this points out the need for the development of a more robust communal ecclesiology for the evangelical church. “But to do so,” Hart writes, “defenders of evangelical ecclesiology will need to provide a rationale for the church that moves beyond the Christian ministry as a spiritual vitamin that supplements a healthy personal religious diet to an older rendering like Calvin’s which regarded the church as the very substance of Christian life, apart from which believers have no hope of salvation.”<sup>8</sup> That compelling rationale for the church is nothing more the biblical foundation on which it was built.

From its beginning the church saw itself as a people united in a shared faith and allegiance to Christ, and this unity and connectedness was not an ideal but a practical reality. George Ladd emphasized this defining quality of life in the early church:

One of the most striking elements in the life of the primitive churches was their sense of fellowship. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and

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<sup>7</sup> D. G. Hart, “The Church in Evangelical Theologies, Past and Future” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, eds. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

fellowship” (2:42). The several statements that the early Christians were “together” (2:44, 47) designate the quality of their fellowship as much as their common assemblage. The early Christians were conscious of being bound together because they were together bound to Christ... It was inconceivable that a believer should be such in isolation. To be a believer meant to share with other believers the life of the coming age, to be a believer in fellowship, to be in the ekklesia.<sup>9</sup>

It is this vision of the church that has been lost in the midst of a highly individualistic contemporary culture. For the church today to develop for itself a more robust ecclesiology that is communal in nature will require reclaiming a part of its identity that it has lost or remembering an essential truth that has been forgotten. Bilezikian makes this point, even highlighting the concerning need to rediscover community within today’s church:

An increasing number of Christians are waking up to the fact that, to a large extent, the church has become ineffective in fulfilling its mission because it has lost a sense of its own identity as community... Whereas the essential definition of the church is to be the community of oneness that unites God’s people into one body, the church, after twenty centuries of existence, has to rediscover its own basic identity as community. As commendable as it is, this quest for community within the contemporary church suggests how far the church has strayed from the intentions of its divine founder by failing to remain what it was designed to be.<sup>10</sup>

What is most disturbing is the realization of just how far the church’s understanding of itself has drifted away from the formative experience of community that clearly marked its beginning.

A number of passages throughout Scripture address the Church’s essential unity and communal connectedness. Ephesians 2:22 explains that those who are in Christ are being “built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” A similar

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<sup>9</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 387-388.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming Local Churches as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 48.

vision is expressed in 1 Peter 2:9-10, where believers are called a people, a priesthood, and a nation. All of these images emphasize the singular unity that the many followers of Christ comprise together. Paul speaks against divisions within the church community in 1 Corinthians 11:18 and upholds God's ultimate purpose to bring everything and everyone into unity under Christ in Ephesians 1:10. Both in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's portrayal of the Church as the body of Christ explicitly emphasizes the vital importance of the interconnectedness and interdependence of each person within the church. Elsewhere, Paul uses this same image of the body to refer to the Church even without explanation (e.g., Eph 1:22-23; 4:12-13, 25, 5:22, 5:30; Col 1:18; 2:19). And in the upper room discourse of John 17 Jesus's prayer expresses his desire for oneness and complete unity among all his disciples. All of these passages elevate the communal oneness of Christ's followers as an essential reality that defines the Church.

In addition to these, perhaps one of the most helpful images of the Church presented in Scripture is that of the family or household. Sankey points out that the use of family imagery is finding prominence in developing African ecclesiologies, especially in places where the individual's identity is tied to their belonging to a particular clan—a family structure larger and more socially pervasive than the nuclear family in America.<sup>11</sup> Sankey goes on to validate the biblical legitimacy of clan or family as an image that should shape ecclesiology:

The idea of church-as-clan is an African expression of what is already a biblical image. The promise, "I shall be your God and you shall be my people," echoes through the Old Testament (Ex. 6:7, 19:5, etc.), and continues into the New. The church is the Israel of God (Gal. 6:6), the chosen people and holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), the family of God (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15). Its members have been "born

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<sup>11</sup> Paul J. Sankey, "The Church as Clan: Critical Reflections on African Ecclesiology," *International Review of Mission* 83, No. 330 (July 1994): 437-438.

again” (John 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:3; 1 John 1:3) or “adopted” (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5) into a new family relationship by virtue of which they can call God “Father” (Rom. 8:14-17).<sup>12</sup>

The importance of the image of family in ecclesiology should be underscored by the centrality of family –spiritual, and even biological— throughout salvation history. When God chose to create a people to bear his name and his truth, he did so through family. Beginning with Abraham, God connected the promise of the covenant with the promise of a family, and the fulfillment of this promise would begin with the birth of a son. It is when Abraham becomes the father of Isaac that he becomes the father of all the people of God. Surely God could have gathered together individuals or people by other means, but he chose rather to create a people, a nation, that would begin as a single family.

In the gospels, Jesus invites people into a new spiritual family. When someone in the crowd told Jesus that his mother and brothers were waiting to speak to him, Jesus responded by offering a deeper meaning to those familial terms and expanding the definition of family in spiritual terms. As Matthew 12:48-50 recounts, “He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” These words took on very tangible meaning and significance when Jesus, as he was dying on the cross, gave his mother over to the care of a new son and presents the disciple John with a new mother. John 19:26-27 explains, “When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 439.

that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” From the gospel accounts, it seems likely that Mary’s other sons would have been available to take over responsibility to provide for her care. Yet, Jesus chose to reach beyond biological connections and obligations when he arranged for the care of his mother to entrust her to one of his disciples. His action suggests that there is a deeper experience of connection and care that would be found within this new spiritual family he was establishing.

Jesus never negated the significance of biological families, but he did subordinate their claims to those of the spiritual family. For example, Jesus condemned a pharisaical teaching and practice that dismissed a person’s obligation to care for his or her parents (Mk 7:10-13). Yet, while Jesus did clearly articulate the importance of a disciple’s obligation to honor and care for family members, he also consistently pointed out the limitations and failings of the biological family—especially when his gospel becomes a source of division within the family. In Luke 12:52-53, Jesus warned, “From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” In this tension that would inevitably arise for many between their natural families and their new spiritual family, Jesus left no room to question the order of a disciple’s allegiance. Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 10:37 that a disciple’s God-given love and concern for members of their natural family must be subordinate to love for Christ: “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

As Jesus acknowledged this loss of connection to biological family that resulted for many from a new connection to a spiritual family, he offered the promise that the new spiritual family would more than make up for that loss: “‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus replied, ‘no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life’” (Mk 10:29-30). Again, these words point to a new family that disciples would find as their connection to Christ would bring them into the new community he was establishing.

Beyond these teachings of Jesus, familial language also appears in many places throughout the New Testament. Horrell notes the prominence of this image for the Church in Paul’s writings and comments on not only how that imagery shaped the Church’s understanding of its identity but also influenced the shape of authority structures that developed in the church:

The imagery of building does not appear prominently in the Pastoral Epistles, but the image of the church as a household clearly does. It is true that the description of the church as an οἶκος, specifically the οἶκος θεοῦ, appears only once (1 Tim 3:15). But the context in which that statement is made reveals that the hierarchical household model has become an important one for the structuring of church life.<sup>13</sup>

The image of the church as God’s family or household is clear in several Scriptures, in addition to the one cited here. Galatians 6:10 refers to fellow believers as “them who are of the household of faith.” Ephesians 2:19 offers a new identity to those who have come to faith in Christ, explaining that they are now “fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” And in Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul uses familial language

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<sup>13</sup> David G. Horrell, “From ἀδελφοί to οἶκος θεοῦ: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 2 (2001): 307-308.

to draw the connection between God and the broad family of families throughout all of creation: “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” This use of household and family language gives the Church an identity that naturally implies deep ties of mutual belonging and devotion for all who are part of it.

Additionally, in a simpler but much broader scope the use of Father language for God, which may be so common and familiar as to be taken for granted, communicates something of a familial connection not only between God and his people, but also among those who call on the same God as Father. The resulting implication of sibling relation between disciples is thus a natural one. Consequently, *adelphos* appears throughout the New Testament, and it is usually used to refer to a believer as a brother, implying clearly that disciples are by virtue of their belonging to Christ not only spiritual siblings but naturally members of God’s family. For example, the words of warning in 1 Corinthians 5:11 refers to those claiming to have faith in Christ simply as those claiming to be a ‘brother:’ “But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.” It may be worth noting that the context that led up to such strong sanctions against false disciples is accusations of incest in which members of the spiritual family were sexually violating members of their natural family. As believers came to see themselves as members of a new spiritual family, such a violation against the meaning and ordering of family itself would be all the more egregious.

Harland suggests that this use of sibling language, which carried a “community-reinforcing impact” among those addressed by the Pauline epistles, may have simply been carried over from a broader usage in ancient Greco-Roman culture.<sup>14</sup> It is not the novelty of this usage, however, that gives weight to the formative use of this term within the early church. As Harland explains, the “Greco-Roman family ideals of solidarity, goodwill, affection, friendship, protection, glory, and honor would be the sorts of values that would come to the minds of those who drew on the analogy of family relationships within group settings... indicating that the association was a second home.”<sup>15</sup> In Paul’s use, however, the association —namely the Church—was to be a new first home in terms of its primacy for the believer. Harland also points out that language that refers to someone else in family terms carries the additional implication that the relationship to that person took priority over other outside relationships and associations.<sup>16</sup> That analysis reinforces the significance of the connections within the community of the church implied by Paul’s use of sibling or family imagery and language.

Guernsey has suggested that the image of family as a foundation for ecclesiology should reshape the way church leaders think of the nature of community into which they are inviting people, as a spiritual family made up of families or made up of family-like clusters of connections:

I am suggesting that the Church redefine itself in system terms as the whole but with the parts being its families rather than the individuals in those families. Even where there are no families, such as in the case of the single person or the

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<sup>14</sup> Philip A. Harland, “Familial Dimensions of Group Identity: “Brothers” (ἀδελφοί) in Associations of the Greek East,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 3 (2005): 492.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 513.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



between-families young adult, I am suggesting that the parts which make up the whole be construed as those clusters of primary relationships which function as family. The Church according to this redefinition becomes a family of families.<sup>17</sup>

Guernsey's proposal is a compelling example of how a single ecclesiological image, like that of the family of God, can hold the potential to reshape the practical thinking, communication, and operation of church leadership.

Another important biblical concept makes the language and imagery of the family or household for the church more practical and actionable: the concept of adoption. Chap Clark has presented a strong rationale for the value of the metaphor of adoption in helping the church to better understand its calling to embrace the vulnerable segments of its community.<sup>18</sup> In fact, one of the obvious aspects of the concept of adoption that would suggest its potential power as a metaphor for the ministry of the church is that in its familiar usage, adoption presumes that there is a child who needs a home, needs a family, needs protection and care. And as already explored in chapter 2, churches in America need to recognize that those are precisely the spiritual and sociological needs of even the most affluent adolescents in their midst.

This use of adoption also stands on a strong biblical foundation. In Romans 8:15 Paul gives a particular clarity to how followers of Jesus should understand their position as children of God: "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship."

Similarly, in Galatians 4:5, Paul speaks about God's redemptive act of making believers

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<sup>17</sup> Guernsey, *A New Design for Family Ministry*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1-8; and Chap Clark, "The Adoptive View of Youth Ministry," in *Youth Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Five Views*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 71-90.

God's children with the phrase, "that we might receive adoption to sonship." And in Ephesians 1:5, Paul summarizes the believer's new inclusion into God's family by stating, "In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."

The use of the adoption metaphor in these passages naturally have profound implications for soteriology as it has much to say about God's intentional choice to claim the believer as a beloved child and about the strength and permanence of his or her new standing in God's family. Yet, this concept of adoption also offers profound implications for ecclesiology as well. First, viewing the church as God's adopted family, rather than God's natural family (which would emphasize divine fatherhood on the basis of creation rather than redemption), should bring a more humble and grateful appreciation for each person's inclusion into the church. It is a subtle reminder that no one in the church can claim any right to belong there apart from God's generously loving initiative. That kind of humility is needed to prevent older members of a church from assuming they hold greater claim to belonging or influence than newer or younger members.

Secondly, while God alone is the adopting agent in this picture of the church, the weight of the choice and initiative that it implies about God's act of including each disciple into his family should naturally invite or inspire that same spirit of inclusion among those who have received it. It is important in applying adoption terminology to the church to keep in mind that it is God and not the church who is the adopting party. Each person in the church has been adopted into God's family, making them all, regardless of age, adopted siblings. In spite of whatever social or structural hierarchies might exist in any church, Jesus made it clear that all believers are brothers and sisters with only one

Father in heaven (Mt 23:8-9). As such, it is the calling, and hopefully the grateful response, of every adopted child to represent the Father's heart of adoption to new siblings.

Lastly, any reflection on the working of adoption in human families quickly brings to mind the ways in which a parent's choice to adopt another child immediately calls for the openness of other children already in the family to be willing, eagerly or reluctantly, to adopt the new child as a sibling. Of course, the adoption of a child has the potential to threaten the sense of security of other children that are already part of the family. There is a natural fear that the newly chosen child may displace the closeness and significance prior children feel in the family system. In fact, some level of disruption to the relational dynamics of the existing family system is more than likely. For the church, the same may be true. In spite of these difficulties, however, adoption naturally demands the willingness to welcome, include and embrace from all other siblings already in the family—whether that family is a biological one or a spiritual one. A clearer picture of the church's role in God's adoptive work comes from reflecting on the unavoidable insecurity that every adopted child will experience at some point. As everyone can appreciate that an adopted child will question whether he or she truly belongs in the family, it becomes clear that every member adopted into God's family shares a responsibility to affirm the legitimate belonging of every other adopted sibling—especially those who are less established in the family of God.

A theology of adoption emphasizes both God's loving initiative in claiming us as God's children and God's desire for his children to extend that same inclusive initiative toward one another. In that sense, the church needs to understand itself as a family of

adopted children called to mutually adopt one another as siblings. And naturally, just as older siblings are usually called upon to help care for younger siblings, so older members of the church bear a greater responsibility to care for adolescents as newly adopted younger siblings in the spiritual sense. This theology of adoption is perfectly consistent with all the familial and household language seen throughout Scripture in reference to the Church or to relationships between followers of Christ. The adoption concept adds to the ideals of familial connectedness, loyalty, and care, the sense that the family has something vitally important to offer those outside it, the sense that the church family is looking outward to those the Father will bring in, and the sense that the church must be ready to offer the necessary welcome to and nurture those being brought into the family.

A communal ecclesiology, especially one focused on a theology of adoption, has the potential to counter some of the pervasive influences of individualism and consumerism that have left most congregations unprepared to offer the kind of relational support that vulnerable segments of their communities, like teens, need. However, the work of developing this biblical understanding of the nature of the Church and its calling beyond a merely conceptual ideal into a living reality experienced by young people in a congregation is a formidable undertaking.

### **The Unique Position of the Church to Respond to the Erosion of Social and Spiritual Support**

The church is unmatched by any other organization or institution in America today in its potential to offer adolescents the cohesive structures of social support they need for their development. Even if it is poorly understood or expressed, the church at least at a fundamental level knows that it has a God-given mandate to care for those in

need and to pass on its faith to the next generation. Congregations might not be as cohesive as they once were, but they still bring together people from a broader span of generations than any other place of regular gathering in contemporary society, and they continue to call people, successfully or not, to long-term, consistent participation with one another. Most healthy congregations are leveraging a great deal of human and financial resources to offer a variety of programs intended to provide for the needs of people both inside and outside its membership. Even if most congregations have lost sight of a biblical ecclesiology that would direct their postures and practices toward truly communal connectedness and care, they still have immense resources that give them the potential to provide needed support that teens no longer find in the society around them.

Pamela Ebstyne King affirmed the importance of this potential in congregations:

Although other institutions and activities offer a wide range of opportunities for youth to explore identity, they rarely offer the breadth and depth of developmental resources that foster identity as congregations do at their best. Rarely do organizations intentionally offer ideological cohesiveness; an intergenerational social network that nurtures and sustains beliefs, meaning, and values; and provide opportunities of sacred and communal transcendence.<sup>19</sup>

As King points out, it is the combination of the several assets that a congregation offers a young person that makes it such a potentially powerful source of nurture for an adolescent's formation.

However, for many congregations these assets are not yet being leveraged to truly make a lasting impact in the discipleship of their teens. A communal ecclesiology focused on an adoptive perspective of each person's relatedness needs to become a shared mindset within the congregation. That shared mindset then needs to reshape the

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<sup>19</sup> Pamela Ebstyne King, "Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts," *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 201.

culture of the leadership and membership of the church so that it can then shape the practical and programmatic landscape of the church. This is the essential process of moving a congregation from a more biblically faithful theology to a more faithful praxis of ministry. For the sake of adolescent discipleship this means rethinking the place of youth ministry within the church. As long as youth ministry stands separate and independent from the church as a whole, it will never offer adolescents what they truly need, because they need the family of God. Only within the congregation as a whole will they find the breadth of supportive connections, sources of long-term nurture, and opportunities to grow in their contributions to the larger mission of the church—all of which are vital to their life-long development and discipleship. Adolescent discipleship has to become integrated into the life and culture of the entire church body if it is effectively going to incorporate young people into its shared life of discipleship and provide the level and quality of support young people need for their development into fully formed and faithfully committed followers of Christ.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 6

### STRATEGIC INITIATIVES TO REDIRECT THE STUDENT MINISTRIES TEAM

Chapters 3 offered a theological reflection on the alignment between the core developmental tasks of adolescence and the key formative tasks of discipleship, and chapter 4 synthesized a number of insights from social and developmental sciences with scriptural perspectives to clarify the most effective means of nurturing growth and formation in those areas. These have important implications for how a congregation's ministry with adolescents can be most effective in approaching its work of discipleship. However, one consistent implication that came out of these reflections is that an effectively supportive ministry of discipleship must offer adolescents a breadth of social support that goes beyond what one devoted adult can offer. What adolescents need is in fact a community of adults providing a network of both close and loose relational ties. It is the larger community of a church's congregation that can offer such a network of support. Chapter 5 developed a theological framework for reshaping a congregation's self-understanding and culture around a communal ecclesiology informed by biblical language of family and, in particular, adoption. Engaging a congregation around these themes may help it not only to become more relationally supportive as a whole but to



become better prepared to embrace and support its younger members in particular. In this chapter and the one that follows, the practical consequences of these theological reflections will inform a more faithful praxis of adolescent discipleship. This chapter will develop a strategic approach for those serving in the congregation's youth ministry department, particularly for those adults investing personally in the discipleship of teens. The final chapter will address the ways that the rest of the church leadership and congregation engage and support its ministry with adolescents.

From decades of observing youth ministry programs directly and indirectly through leadership networks and national gatherings of youth workers, it seems clear that the reflexive and perhaps unexamined mode of operating for most contemporary, suburban, evangelical youth ministries like that at Community Presbyterian Church is to offer a weekly program that gathers adolescents together, apart from the rest of the congregation, to provide time for relational engagement, an experience of musical worship, and a component of scriptural teaching. Many, if not most, of these programs also include an opportunity for teens to gather in a smaller group setting, usually apart from the primary programmatic gathering to provide deeper relational connections and to engage teens in conversations that encourage their personal reflections on their faith development. There is nothing in the basic elements of that programmatic model that would prevent it from effectively supporting the formative discipleship of the young people it serves. However, there is also nothing in it that would guarantee its effectiveness. In fact, those basic programmatic elements that so many youth ministries in countless congregations share in common is nothing more than a structural form in which to do the work of ministry. The substantive content of the ministry—its teaching, its

deployment of adult leaders, and its engagement with parents and other adults in the larger congregation—is what will differentiate ministries that might look very similar outwardly but have dramatically different outcomes with their youth.

Concerns about the long-term effectiveness of adolescent discipleship at Community Presbyterian Church do not mean that its current approach to ministry with teens needs to be abandoned. To the contrary, there is much in this congregation’s current approach to youth ministry that has been very effective. The ongoing high levels of adolescent participation is equivalent to about 20 percent of the church’s weekly attendance, and the ministry has a significant number of adults from the congregation that are genuinely committed to the work of ministry and deeply invested in the lives of individual teens. These are encouraging indications that this ministry has already in its current operation some valuable assets from which to build a stronger future. However, the need to shift some fundamental elements of this ministry has been acknowledged as too many teens have failed to continue in patterns of discipleship within a community of faith beyond their high school years.

In order to lay the foundation for a life-long discipleship in adolescents, the substantive content of youth ministry at Community Presbyterian Church needs to be built around efforts to bring the nurture of spiritual formation deeper into the lives of teens and to bring those teens deeper into the life of the church. For the student ministries department of Community Presbyterian Church, the goal is to redirect its ministry with adolescents to focus on efforts that will support their development of identity, belonging, and autonomy as uniquely informed, defined, and directed by the gospel. This goal has been addressed in three key areas of the student ministries department: the core of its

teaching and small group discussions with teens, its deployment of adult leaders, and its engagement with parents. This new ministry strategy is not a new program. Rather, this new ministry strategy is an array of initiatives intended to become sustainable, ongoing practices that will redirect the youth ministry of Community Presbyterian Church to focus on those elements of engagement with adolescents that will have a more enduring impact on their discipleship.

### **Directing and Deepening Student Discipleship Around Identity, Belonging, and Autonomy**

Two key strategies have been developed to focus student discipleship around identity, belonging, and autonomy. The first has been to work with the directors of the church's early and middle adolescent ministries to redevelop their teaching plans in order to build a curriculum around the formative needs of adolescents. In part this process has involved beginning with these developmental needs as a starting point to select scriptural passages and themes that need to be shared with students. This process has also involved using these core developmental needs as a lens with which to look at a variety of other passages in order to identify ways those passages might speak to the needs of adolescents.

Elevating these adolescent developmental themes to serve as the starting point for curriculum development is a rather significant shift from the current approach of the student ministries department. This shift does not in any way diminish the role of Scripture in the ministry's teaching, but it does mean that the goals of building general biblical literacy and exposing students to the breadth of Scripture are no longer the starting point for developing each program's teaching plan. Just as significantly, while

the needs of teens have already informed and guided curriculum development to some degree, this shift means a change of focus from those needs typically associated with problem behaviors to those needs that are truly core to adolescent development.

The other strategy aimed at refocusing student discipleship has been to elevate the role of small groups in the ministry. A number of different approaches to engaging students in a small group setting have been explored at Community Presbyterian Church in recent years: setting up small groups as an added option apart from the weekly program for students that want to connect in a deeper way, incorporating small groups into the weekly program, setting up groups informally in an ad hoc way that changes from one week to the next, and setting up groups in a more structured, consistent way. Because the role of social support has been found to be so vital in nurturing adolescent development, the strategy identified as the most effective is to establish a model for student small groups that will make them a foundational element of the ministry program. Time set aside for teens to connect with one another and with invested leaders in a small group setting has been made a consistent component of every weekly program, comprising a full half of the duration of the program at the high school level. These small groups are built around students of the same age and gender with the goal of having two to four adults investing in these same groups of students consistently for four years. The teaching portion of the program in the larger programmatic setting that precedes the time students spend in this small group setting has been understood and explicitly stated to serve the supportive purpose of facilitating meaningful connections and conversations between teens and adults in the small group setting. In light of adolescents' need for consistent, caring support to nurture the formation of both their identity and belonging in

Christ, the connections and conversations that can take place in a small group setting offer the greatest potential to help students work through who they are becoming in Christ and to develop those sources of secure attachment that will ultimately help them connect to Christ and the Church. The resources offered to small group leaders to support these conversations and connections, like the teaching curriculum, give special attention to these issues as well.

### **Redefining and Redirecting the Role of Invested Adults**

Again, in light of the vitally important role social support plays in nurturing the development of adolescents, and in light of the lack of social support most adolescents find in the society around them, the role of invested adults from the congregation who are offering themselves to care for young people is perhaps more important for the effectiveness of discipleship with adolescents than anything else the church can offer. In spite of that reality, most adults who step forward to serve in the church's ministry with youth approach the opportunity with an uncertainty about what they have to offer and tend initially to see their role as rather insignificant compared to that of church staff members. These adults need the right perspective on the crucial role they play in the lives of adolescents, and they need the right equipping to fulfill that role.

To redefine and redirect the role of these invested adults, the strategy has been to provide a new focus in their ongoing training and support that provides them with a better understanding of the needs of adolescent development and identifies them as the primary ministers called to address those needs. In particular, adult leaders are offered ways to encourage moratorium and consolidation to support teens' process of identity formation, the qualities of effective mentoring and ideas to build relational bridges to other adults in

the church to support teens' sense of belonging, and ideas for empowering student leadership and service to support teens' growing autonomy. In a consistent, ongoing way, the significance of the role of these adult leaders is addressed directly and indirectly through stories of students whose lives have been impacted by them in lasting ways. This equipping and encouragement has been provided by the pastor for student ministries and by the directors of each age level ministry team through training meetings and more personalized conversations.

### **Engaging Parents as Missional Advocates for their Teens**

Even as the development of autonomy pulls adolescents away from the full dependency they had on their parents as children, they should not ever disengage from their parents in the process of healthy development. To the contrary, parents remain the most influential adults in adolescents' lives throughout their growth into adulthood.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important to recognize parents as the most invested and closely connected adults in any young person's life. If these parents have at least a foundational connection to Christ and some measure of appreciation for the work of the church's ministry with their children, then they too should be viewed and engaged as important leaders in the ministry of discipleship, hopefully as the most important of all. Of course, many parents do not have a faith of their own and will not share this view of their role in the discipleship of their sons and daughters. Whenever possible, however, parents need to be engaged as ministry partners and even missional advocates for their teens, who possess

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<sup>1</sup> Mirka van Beest and Chris Baerveldt, "The Relationship Between Adolescents' Social Support from Parents and From Peers," *Adolescence* 34 (Spring, 1999): 200.

the greatest potential for supporting the work God wants to accomplish in and through their teens.

Three strategies have been pursued for engaging parents in the work of nurturing their adolescent children's discipleship. The first has been to develop regular communication to parents with elements of teaching and encouragement to equip them to nurture the discipleship process on their own terms. The second strategy has been to encourage the establishment of a parent support small group that meets weekly at the same time as the youth ministry program, intended to offer ongoing relational support between parents as they navigate the adolescent years of their children. The hope is that connections built between parent participants in this group would lead to connections between families and that these connections might result in the kind of intergenerational network closure that enhances the social capital available to the teens of these parents. The third strategy has been to provide annual parenting seminars with guest speakers who address topics aimed at helping parents support their teens' personal and spiritual development. These seminars are intended not only to equip parents with teaching and strategies to help them support their adolescent children but also to facilitate conversations and connections between parents that may become sources of ongoing support for them. Parents need not only a better understanding of the internal and social processes shaping their adolescent children's development and discipleship but also the encouragement to act more intentionally as agents of support in these areas of their children's needs.

## **Assessment and Evaluation of Initiatives**

An array of initiatives has been incorporated into the ongoing ministry efforts of Community Presbyterian Church's student ministries department. Most of these have proved successful and beneficial for the effectiveness of the ministry, but several have been adjusted and improved along the way. Because the approach here to developing a new strategy for ministry has been to redirect or to strengthen ongoing ministry practices, rather than to create new programs, one of the challenges in implementation is that these changes need to continually be reiterated and reinforced. Successful implementation in one month can revert to older patterns in the next. However, over time several of these strategies are becoming established as the culture of ministry. In terms of assessment, it is also important to note that while the ultimate goal is to see these strategies contribute to a more formative discipleship of adolescents for their personal and spiritual development over a lifetime, those long-term outcomes cannot be directly assessed here. Instead, these strategies will be evaluated in terms of their more immediate engagement with the student ministries team and preliminary anecdotal evidence of effectiveness.

The strategy of redeveloping the teaching and small group discussion material around identity, belonging, and autonomy encountered some initial confusion and resistance from the ministry directors until the terminology of three developmental tasks was replaced with three adolescent developmental questions: Who am I? Whose am I? What difference do I make? Working from those clarifying questions as a starting point for reflecting on adolescent needs, a framework was developed for building each ministry's teaching calendar that laid out the biblical themes and passages that addressed them. Those questions also became a filter for refining discussion questions and



conversation starters provided to small group leaders. This helped to shift elements of teaching and discussion questions that might have otherwise tended to be informational and expository to be much more personally engaging and relevant to the teens in these gatherings and interactions.

The shift to make student small groups the core element of every weekly program has had a number of advantageous outcomes. There was some initial concern that pushing every student who attends the weekly youth group program into a more intimate setting would be intimidating and uncomfortable for some. To the contrary, however, every student, even those who were attending for the very first time, seemed grateful to land in a smaller relational setting where they got to be known immediately by adults and peers. As a result, every student that attends the youth ministry now immediately has at least two adults who know them by name and will welcome them back when they return. And in this small group setting, the sense of being known quickly deepens from knowing names to sharing struggles and seeking support. This is the foundation of helping teens find a source of secure belonging. Of course, some students are more ready than others to share personal issues as they process the content of the program, but almost all of them express gratitude for the connectedness they experience in their small groups. These groups have facilitated deep bonds between some teens and their adult leaders, evidenced by many instances of students and adults initiating times of informal connection outside of the program. Further evidence of enhanced support for teens has come from listening to adult leaders who share their observations and concerns for the developmental needs of individual students on a deeper level.

The new approach to leader training has also been well received and appears to have been effective in strengthening both their sense of purpose and confidence. Leaders have reported feeling greater clarity both about their role in supporting the discipleship of their students and about the needs of their students. In particular, understanding the need for belonging and the role of social support has provided a needed validation for the time leaders are investing with their students, especially in the more informal settings. The challenge hindering this strategy has been the struggle to get this training to all leaders as their busy schedules prevent some of them from participating. A variety of different approaches to scheduling and arranging these trainings has been explored, but no ideal solution to this challenge has been found. The church continues to offer these trainings in the hope that while no leader will attend all of them, all will attend some of them.

The strategy of parent engagement has been less successful overall. While the approach of the strategy seems to have been right, it has not been as well received as anticipated. The parent communication strategy was much more effective with younger adolescents than with older ones. From electronic tools that allow the open rates of these communications to be tracked, it was clear that the parents of older students did not engage with this communication nearly as much as those with younger students. This was not a surprising finding. Parents consistently seem to take a less proactive role in supporting their teens' participation in programs and activities as they get older. The other challenge is that as these communications became very consistent, even those parents that were engaging with them initially began to open them less and less over time. A small percentage of parents have expressed gratitude for the insights and encouragement they are receiving, but it appears that many busy parents over time lose

interest in receiving material addressing the spiritual and personal development of their teens. If too frequent and familiar, these communications become clutter in their mailboxes. The strategy of providing parenting seminars has also had only partial success. Guest speakers were brought in to address topics such as emotional struggles adolescents face, the intrusion of social media, and protecting kids on the internet. With each of these, a Christian perspective was offered, but the topics were crafted to appeal to parents outside the church as well. Some of these seminars have been well attended, but others have not. A small group of parents have begun to meet weekly during the youth ministry program for ongoing support and encouragement, but participation has not been as strong or consistent as hoped, and it is not clear whether this group has the momentum to continue long-term. Parents in today's society are extremely busy and stretched between an overwhelming number of competing obligations. Engaging them will remain a challenge. Realistically, communications may likely need to be less frequent and employ some thoughtful use of marketing strategies to make them more appealing. Parenting seminars need a great deal of promotion both in the church and in the surrounding community, and the topics are likely to be more important for encouraging attendance than the name recognition or reputation of the speaker. The parent support group will need to be relaunched with a greater degree of structured leadership, and this will need to be implemented as a seasonal group rather than an ongoing one.

On the whole, these strategies have been effective in refocusing the youth ministry of Community Presbyterian Church on the deeper needs of adolescents and nurturing those developmental processes that are central to both Christian discipleship and healthy maturing. Even while more work is needed to continue to implement and

sustain these changes, it is clear that these strategies are moving the ministry in the right direction to lead it to a praxis that is more faithful to both Scripture and to the context of adolescent discipleship. And yet, these strategies for the youth ministry department are only part of the needed ministry refinement. The balance of the work will connect the discipleship of the church's adolescents to the congregation as a whole.

## CHAPTER 7

### STRATEGIC INITIATIVES TO ENGAGE THE CONGREGATION

The kinds of social support described in chapter 4 that are needed in the nurturing of adolescent discipleship inevitably extend the scope of this ministry beyond the youth ministry department of the church. The church as a whole needs to embrace its broader shared ownership of the work of adolescent discipleship, and a majority of members need to feel some measure of responsibility for the success of this ministry. Ultimately, what adolescents need for their long-term discipleship is to be embraced and supported by a church community. While the bulk of the care and connection that teenagers need in the process of their spiritual and personal formation will come from the close connection offered by those invested adults serving in the student ministries of the church, they also need the more diffuse support offered by a network of relationships in a congregation, because some dimensions of support, connection, and empowerment can only be offered by a broader community of adults.

When teens experienced the adults in a congregation as a welcoming and affirming community, they can provide those teens a context for their identity formation that reinforces aspects of who these young people are becoming in Christ and their

intrinsic value to the family of God. The congregation can also offer a sense of connectedness to adolescents that reinforces their sense of belonging, not just in the personal sense but in the larger societal sense. This connection to a supportive community of adults is precisely what most teens are missing in today's society, and the congregation can compensate for this deficit. This sense of belonging takes on spiritual significance as the congregation reinforces for adolescents the belief that they belong to the family of God. As adults in the congregation actively adopt them into their community, they offer a tangible experience of God's adoption of these young people into his spiritual family. Engagement with the broader congregation can also offer adolescents valuable opportunities to develop healthy autonomy, as young people need to grow not into isolated independence but into a larger network of interdependence. The congregation can provide opportunities for adolescents to participate with adults and contribute in ways that will validate them as full-fledged members of the family of God. The congregation will have far more of these opportunities to offer teens than the youth ministry department of the church, and positive experiences in such opportunities are vital for developing a teen's sense of efficacy and purpose.

All of these beneficial aspects of congregational engagement with adolescents is vital for establishing patterns of discipleship that will last beyond their time in the church's youth ministry. The goal is that when these young people graduate from high school and leave this particular congregation, they will feel encouraged and inclined to step into a new congregation where they can continue to grow in their faith and contribute to the Church. In simplest terms, the positive and affirming experiences of

participation and engagement with the adult community of one congregation will make it much easier for them to join another.

In order for Community Presbyterian Church to become the kind of congregation that engages adolescents in this broader way, significant changes will be required in the ways the congregation as a whole thinks about its ministry with young people, in the ways the congregation thinks about itself as a community, and in the ways the congregation pursues all of its ministries and programs. In short, there will need to be changes to the collective culture of the church as a whole. Culture, however, can be one of the most difficult things to change in an organization. Therefore, the strategies presented here are intended only to help the congregation take preliminary steps toward a new culture. This new culture needs to prioritize its ministry with adolescents as a privilege and responsibility shared by the entire church, rather than merely the one department or team that provides a focused program for teens. This new culture must envision the church as God's adopted family, called to welcome and embrace its younger brothers and sisters. And this new culture must strive for a broader engagement and participation in its many various ministries across the generational boundaries that have typically excluded young people.

In order to foster broader congregational engagement with the church's calling to nurture adolescent discipleship, several strategies were aimed at initiating some systemic changes in the culture and practices of congregational life at Community Presbyterian Church. As in the previous chapter, these initiatives are focused not so much on creating new programs, but rather on creating several small but strategic and sustainable changes within already existing programs to establish a new way of doing ministry in the culture

of the congregation. Some of these initiatives were intended to bring organizational change from the top down, by addressing priorities at the church's highest levels of leadership. Others initiatives were intended to bring cultural change from the bottom up, beginning with the students themselves and positioning them in new roles that would then be influential in opening doors for more of their peers.

### **Elevating Adolescent Discipleship in the Vision of the Church and in the Culture of Executive Leadership**

The first strategy to strengthen congregational engagement with young people was to elevate adolescent discipleship as a priority in the vision and culture of the church's executive leadership team. This meant intentionally engaging the strategic planning process of the executive staff to reflect on the need to strengthen cohesion and support across all the generations of the church. The congregation has strong representation across a broad span of ages, but the leadership team has been attuned to expressed concerns over the segmentation and increasingly perceived separation of the different generations within the congregation. This presented the opportunity to advocate for the executive team and elders to name as one of the church's long-term goals the strategy of strengthening intergenerational connections throughout the activities and ministries of the church.

Once the leadership identified growing the church inter-generationally as one of its long-term priorities, this created an opportunity to plan a sermon series focused on fostering a deeper understanding of the church as community and embracing a theology of family as described in chapter 5. A series of five sermons engaged the congregation to reevaluate its culture and practices in light of scriptural teaching of God's intentions for



life within the Church, to reflect on the cultural barriers that need to be overcome to create biblical community, and the particular needs of adolescents that the congregation can address when it functions as the family of God. The identified priority of strengthening inter-generational connections across the church also initiated an opportunity to engage leaders of various ministries that encouraged them to look for opportunities to welcome and engage teenagers into their ministries and events.

This engagement with the executive leadership of the church around the priority of adolescent discipleship has also presented the opportunity to advocate for the executive team to embrace teenagers as one of the church's top three strategic target groups for greater investments in outreach and support for several years to come. This shared understanding of the priority of youth ministry among the executive leadership meant that several ministries throughout the church began looking for ways to build bridges between older members and teenagers. Because it was identified as a strategic goal, stories of those connections were then celebrated and affirmed by leaders outside the youth ministry department. This helped to reinforce this strategy and foster broader support for it.

### **Communicating the Vision and Shared Calling to the Congregation**

The second strategy to strengthen congregational engagement with the care and support of its teens was to communicate this vision and shared calling directly to the congregation by strategically influencing and engaging the church's preaching. As mentioned above, a five-week sermon series was designed to help the congregation envision what it means to be the family of God and to explore the practical ways members could live this out, particularly in seeking to understand and welcome their

younger brothers and sisters in the faith. In addition, a few other occasional sermons were leveraged as opportunities to reinforce the message that every young person in the congregation belongs to every adult in the congregation. And lastly, as a part of a new ongoing process for developing messages for the church, a representative of the student ministries department was designated to serve on the sermon planning team. The purpose of this role is to look for ways to bring a need, perspective, or story of young people into each sermon as illustrations or points of application. This has brought an element of relevance for teenagers into the church's preaching, which enhances teens' sense of belonging in the worship services, and it has also helped to sustain congregational awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of teenagers in their midst.

### **Providing New Ways for Young People to Engage with the Family of Faith as They Worship, Participate, and Serve**

The third strategy to strengthen congregational engagement with adolescents has been to create new opportunities or strengthen existing opportunities for teens to connect with and participate in the various programs and ministries throughout the life of the church family. The one opportunity for participation that research has shown to be the strongest predictor of long-term church engagement for young people after high school is their participation in the corporate worship of the church.<sup>1</sup> Three initiatives have been employed to increase this participation. First, the celebration of teen baptisms that have typically followed camps and mission trips has been moved from the special worship and celebration events that followed those camps to the regular weekend worship services. While this added a scheduling burden to the planning of those worship services, it has

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<sup>1</sup> Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 75.

increased teen attendance on those weekends and presented another opportunity to reinforce the message that young people have a place of belonging in the church family. Second, the job description of one member of the worship department was changed so that the person overseeing the student worship teams leading in midweek programs was also helping to lead worship in the church's weekend services. This gives young people the chance to develop a stronger sense of connection with a leader they will see in the weekend services. That staff member has been instrumental in engaging young people to serve alongside him as musicians and vocalists leading in the church's weekend services. Third, the midweek high school program was relocated to meet in the church's sanctuary, where the weekend services are held. The intent in this move has been to help young people develop a sense of familiarity and belonging in the physical space that for too long has been seen as a space that belonged to the adults of the church. As that physical space becomes more familiar to teens, they are less likely to question whether they belong in the church's worship space and more likely instead to feel like older members have come into their space during weekend services.

Another opportunity to help young people participate in the life of the church family has been to invite them into opportunities to serve and lead in ministries beyond the youth department. An example of this initiative has included new recruiting efforts in the church's children's ministries department to engage teenagers into leadership roles, both in volunteer roles for some and in paid internships for others. Several high school students have been invited into prominent roles in leading worship for the entire church, while others have been trained to support the technical production of the worship services. A new student deacon role was created to bring teenagers onto the existing

deacon board of the church. This has given those teens opportunities to serve with adults and also to manage some church funds to provide for the needs of peers on their campuses. Students have also been invited to serve in missions, both on short term trips with adults to an area development project in Ethiopia and on the church's mission leadership board.

One more initiative that has supported the strategy of strengthening congregational engagement has been the effort to have every teen that participates in the youth program's annual house building mission trip to Mexico connected with an adult in the congregation that will serve as a prayer partner for the teen throughout the week that they are away on the trip. These adult prayer partners were asked to write two letters to the student that would be given to them at the beginning and end of the trip. The adults were asked simply to express their support and encouragement for the student, and these adults committed to praying for the teen personally throughout their time away. Many of these students verbalized how meaningful it was to receive those notes, some explaining that it was the first hand written letter they had ever received and others expressing surprise that someone they did not know in the church would care for them. More recently, several have mentioned that they have kept those notes in a visible place at their homes since the trip. Unexpectedly, the result of this simple short-term opportunity to connect has been that most of these adult prayer partners have maintained some level of informal connection with these teens after the trip was over, often by simply seeking them out at the church to greet them.

## **Assessment and Evaluation of Initiatives**

These several strategic initiatives have worked together to bring much greater change in the culture and ministry of the congregation than initially anticipated. The executive leadership of the church enthusiastically embraced the prioritization of connecting teens to the larger church family and gave this initiative significant support with leadership engagement across departments, with financial resources, with space in the preaching calendar, and with opportunities to influence the ongoing teaching of the church. As a result, this priority has become a part of the language of the church, often expressed with the word, “inter-generational,” as ministry leaders and adults not connected to the student ministries department mention ideas to support this initiative and share ways that they have tried to help young people feel connected and included. This seems to indicate the beginning of a culture change that has solicited the active engagement of adults with teens. The particular approach taken here was not to create programs or activities that would bring teens and adults together, but rather to help adults in the church and leaders of adult ministries to reflect on the needs of teens and creatively pursue opportunities to welcome teens as valued participants within the existing activities of the church. With this encouragement, several ministries initiated new efforts to engage teenagers in the church. For example, several high school boys were invited to attend the church’s men’s retreat and the cost of their participation was sponsored by several of the older participants. Similarly, the women’s ministry team secured space at one of their large annual events and reached out to invite high school girls to join them.

This prioritization of teens has also influenced some recent changes made to the church’s worship services. When the church decided to improve the church’s worship

experience with the goal of making it more accessible and inviting to unchurched people in the surrounding community, the leadership chose to identify teens in the community as one of its target groups for influencing the choices they would have to make in the process, particularly choices around style that can be so contentious in congregations. While some older members have expressed concern that this prioritization of young people makes them feel less valued, the majority of the older members of the congregation have expressed their support of this, motivated by a heart-felt desire to see more teens participating in the life of the church.

The strategy of communicating the vision and shared calling to the congregation through preaching was also well received. The initial series of messages aimed at reshaping the church's vision for its life as a family of faith solicited a great deal of enthusiasm, especially from parents and older members. But the greatest long-term influence has come from simply adding an adolescent representative to the sermon planning team. The most encouraging result from that strategy has been hearing teens comment on the fact that almost every sermon has a point of application specifically addressed to them.

Unfortunately, the initiatives aimed at getting more young people to attend weekend worship services has had only moderate results so far. Despite the many elements that have been crafted to make the worship services appealing, inviting, comfortable, and meaningful for their age group, only a small percentage of those teens connected to the church participate in congregational worship. It may simply be that more time is needed to see this participation grow and it may also be a matter of getting a critical mass of these young people to attend together before the experience creates a

more tangible sense of belonging for them. One encouraging indicator of improved engagement is simply that those students who are participating in congregational worship express appreciation for how they feel the teaching connects with issues on their level and speaks directly to their stage of life. That is a clear indication that bringing a representative of the youth ministry into the sermon planning meetings has in fact succeeded in leveraging sermons to help young people feel a greater sense of belonging in the worship services.

The several opportunities that were created for teens to join in ministries of the church beyond the youth department were almost all well supported by adults and well received by students. As a result, there is a visibly higher level of engagement between adolescents and the congregation that can be confirmed by the number of young people participating in areas of service and leadership that were not previously. Those visible roles taken by the first teens to join them led to the multiplication of those roles and opportunities for others. One exception of this enthusiasm was that the second group of student deacons did not have as positive an experience as the first group, due in large part to the adult support of this opportunity passing hands to some who were not as well equipped to coach and connect with these students. The teens serving on the musical worship team have been an exceptional example of student engagement. These young people have been publically recognized as some of the most talented musicians and vocalists in the church, and that validation, both in word and in opportunities, has clearly affirmed the value of ongoing contributions fromf teens to the life of the church in ways that are encouraging to other young people. Just as importantly, however, those young people have found a network of adult support from the team they serve with that has

provided a source of care and encouragement in the midst of times of personal struggles. Two of those students have been encouraged from the experience to pursue an education and career in music. While this example is clearly exceptional rather than typical, it indicates the potential for young people to connect with and contribute to the congregation. These experiences further indicate the potential support that adolescents can find with adults outside the church's student ministries department that can contribute to their development of identity, belonging, and autonomy. The lasting benefits of outcomes like these is not just for the adolescents involved, but for others who will later find adults in the church more welcoming of their contributions because of these early positive experiences.

Overall, this array of strategic initiatives that were aimed at increasing engagement of the congregation with the church's discipleship of its teenagers has made a significant impact on the culture of the church. A greater awareness of the needs of young people and sense of shared responsibility for teens across a wider section of the congregation has been evident through informal conversations with adults from different areas of the church and also through the self-initiated efforts of several ministries to intentionally welcome young people into full participation in their events or programs where teens have never been engaged before. Several changes in the weekend worship experience, including the strategic crafting of messages relevant to teens and the ongoing inclusion of teens and student ministries staff in visible leadership, have made the central gathering event of the entire congregation much more engaging for teenagers. While the level of teen attendance at these worship services has not yet increased significantly, this goal will remain a priority because of the clear potential this gathering has to help more



adults in the church feel a connection to young people and more importantly because engagement with congregational worship will help teens establish patterns of investment in church participation that they will need to carry into adulthood. Most encouraging of all, many adolescents who were brought into opportunities to serve and lead alongside adults in the congregation in a number of different ministry settings were genuinely welcomed and valued as equal contributors and partners in ministry.

Several improvements need to be made to these strategies. Executive leadership will need to continue to be encouraged to elevate the prioritization of connecting young people to the life of the congregation. As time passes, other priorities could easily displace this one. Stories of successful engagement with teens, especially those initiated by other ministry departments, must be celebrated with leaders throughout the church. Ensuring that as many of those examples are repeated will turn an initiative into a cultural practice. There is a need to continue searching for and even creating new opportunities for teens to serve and lead alongside adults in the congregation. As was found with the second group of student deacons, identifying and equipping a few adults in those areas to serve as supportive, welcoming coaches in the midst of those opportunities is the key to making these experiences valuable for the discipleship of adolescents. To increase the number of teens engaging with the worship of the congregation, new efforts will need to focus on not just the elements of the service itself, but on helping students to engage with their peers in those services to feel a measure of security that might yet be missing for them. And lastly, the teaching of the church needs to continue to reinforce the biblical view of the church as a family of adopted brothers and sisters, older and younger, who belong to each other, need each other, and are called to love and serve each other.

These strategies have the potential to help countless churches like Community Presbyterian Church in similar communities across America to redirect their efforts to nurture a formative and enduring discipleship among adolescents. Recognizing the unique needs and opportunities of these pivotal years of development, youth ministries should seek to add to the strategies offered here to focus biblical teaching and adult engagement on the needs of every adolescent to establish their identity, belonging, and autonomy and on the unique ways the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses those needs. And because the levels of support teens need from caring adults to thrive in each of these areas of their discipleship goes beyond what one department of the church can offer, every congregation should explore strategies like those offered here to increase the entire congregation's engagement of adolescents. The foundation for those strategies is a biblical understanding of the church as the family of God's adopted children. That theological foundation needs to undergird any church's efforts to extend and broaden the support and care it offers young people. While different strategies and initiatives will work differently in each congregation, those shared here simply help to point future initiatives in the right direction of a lived ecclesiology that prioritizes God's inclusive adoption of every disciple.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Community Presbyterian Church has had a long history of vital ministry in its community and a strong reputation for investing in programs that serve young people. With a strongly evangelical theological heritage, this is a congregation deeply committed to helping young people grow into a life of Christian discipleship. It has therefore maintained a high level of investment in the resourcing of its ministries with adolescents, and in terms of several outwardly observable measures, this congregation has enjoyed a long history of successful ministry with teens. Yet, like many other congregations in affluent suburban communities across North America, Community Presbyterian Church is recognizing that its ministry of discipleship has not been as formative or as enduring in the lives of its young people as intended. It is becoming increasingly apparent, not just in this congregation but in many across the country, that for far too many teens, their graduation out of the youth ministry program has been a graduation from church altogether. This trend raises concerns, not about patterns of church attendance but about the patterns of discipleship missing from the lives of these young people who were at one time fully engaged with the ministry of the church. All of this is pointing to the need to bring the church's ministry of discipleship more deeply into the lives of adolescents and the need to bring adolescents more deeply into the life of the church.

That shift needs to be guided by the development of a practical theology of adolescent discipleship that is both faithful to scriptural directives that inform the work of discipleship and faithful to the context of this work of discipleship—namely the context of adolescence itself. Teens in communities like this one face intense pressures to conform to demanding expectations for their academic, athletic, extracurricular, and

social performance. In addition to those pressures imposed by the social dynamics of an affluent community, adolescence itself presents a number of difficult developmental challenges. In the midst of those pressures, however, these adolescents have very little support from the adults around them. This lack of social capital leaves them functionally and experientially alone in their struggle to navigate the precarious developmental span between childhood and adulthood. As a result, most adolescents do not have the support they need for their well-being and healthy development. Statistical measures of adolescent health reveal the discouraging picture of a generation of teens plagued by loneliness, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, sexual experimentation and exploitation, and suicidal ideation. Congregations like Community Presbyterian Church need to consider the weight of these issues and recognize adolescents as a vulnerable population in need of special attention and care.

To address these needs, a practical theology of adolescent discipleship must establish a clear picture of adolescence and what God intends for a person's growth and development through this phase of life. Social and developmental sciences, while secular in their biases and orientations, offer a great deal of insight into the developmental processes of adolescence. These insights need to be incorporated into a practical theology of adolescent discipleship, because they reveal some fundamental aspects of the processes God designed and built into the patterns of physiological and psychosocial growth in adolescence—processes that God intended to bring each young person into wholeness and maturity in adulthood. Three core developmental tasks have been identified as normative, foundational, and essential in adolescent development: the construction of one's identity, the search for one's belonging, and the establishment of

one's autonomy. A ministry committed to helping young people grow into the fullness of humanity that God intends must support these developmental tasks.

Of course, adolescent discipleship is focused on not just personal formation but on spiritual formation as well. Therefore, a faithful praxis of ministry with teens needs to be shaped by a biblical understanding of discipleship. Recognizing that God is creator of the physiological and psychosocial processes of adolescent development and that these processes were intended to bring people into the fullness of their humanity, it should be expected that those normative developmental tasks of adolescence should have a clear correspondence to the spiritually formative tasks of discipleship—those tasks that bring people into spiritual fullness in Christ. A theological reflection on the scriptural directives for discipleship on a foundational level reveals core intended outcomes seen in the work of Jesus with his own disciples. These formative spiritual tasks of discipleship include the work of helping disciples find their identity in Christ, their belonging in relationship with God and his people, and their purpose or calling in serving the mission of God. Those essential elements of discipleship position a person's growing faith in Christ as the source of their developing identity, belonging, and autonomy. This alignment between the psychosocial tasks of adolescence and the formative tasks of discipleship indicate those areas where the church's ministry with teens needs to focus its energy and support. In fact, it is this alignment that makes discipleship with adolescents so important and potentially transformative. There is no other period in a person's life where their developmental needs will align so strongly with the work of discipleship. The core of the gospel's invitation to an adolescent is to find in Christ those things they most deeply long for and need to find at their stage of life.

However, effectively nurturing the adolescent's development of identity, belonging, and autonomy requires significant levels of social support, levels of support that most teens simply do not have today. But this presents an immense opportunity for the church to step into that scarcity and provide what adolescents desperately need. In order to do so, a congregation must have a community of adults willing to invest with personal care and consistent presence in the lives of young people, and the support they offer needs to be shaped by an understanding of how best to support the core aspects of adolescent discipleship.

Research in the developmental sciences has identified some specific ways that social support can most effectively nurture adolescents in their development of identity, belonging, and autonomy. These strategies, along with biblical teaching that most precisely addresses these themes, need to be incorporated into the congregation's discipleship of its young people.

Reflecting on these kinds of nurturing investments, it is clear that effective adolescent discipleship requires the kind of social support that can come only from the whole church family. However, American churches have a history of practice that has largely relegated youth ministry to an isolated department of the church. Furthermore, most congregations are not prepared to offer this kind of support, because most have lost a biblical vision for what it means to be the church. Larger sociological influences, especially the cultural values of individualism and consumerism, have eroded the communal aspects of life in the American church. To restore these missing pieces of a biblical ecclesiology, a focus on the biblical language of the family of God and household of faith need to inform a congregation's working self-concept. In particular, God's act of

adopting his people offers the clearest and most compelling picture of how adults throughout the congregation need to view their calling to embrace adolescents as adopted younger siblings that need to be fully welcomed as family. In this way, a renewed vision of the church as family and a broader calling to share responsibility for embracing young people will prepare the congregation to offer the support and care that is essential for their discipleship.

The implications of these theological reflections clarify what is needed for a more faithful praxis of adolescent discipleship. For the church to live into this vision, changes are necessary both in the ways that the youth ministry department of the church carries out its ministry with adolescents and in the ways that the rest of the church leadership and congregation engage and support its ministry with adolescents. To that end, an array of strategic initiatives has been implemented to take the first steps toward these necessary changes. The first set of strategies addressed ways to redirect the student ministries department of the church to focus on those areas of spiritual formation that align with the developmental tasks of adolescence. These initiatives included changes in the content and focus of teaching offered to students and the small group discussions used to help students process that content, new training offered to invested adult leaders working with students focused on the nurturing approaches discussed here, and new efforts to encourage and equip parents to partner in this work of discipleship.

The second set of strategies focused on ways to strengthen congregational engagement with the discipleship of its young people. These include strategic initiatives aimed at changing the ways that the rest of the church leadership and congregation prioritize, engage, and support its ministry with adolescents. These initiatives included

efforts to elevate the prioritization of adolescent discipleship in the strategic planning of the executive leadership team, efforts to bring greater focus on adolescent discipleship into the preaching of the church, and new ways to engage adolescents in the worship, ministry programs, and service opportunities of the congregation outside the youth ministry department.

With both sets of strategies, these initiatives focused not so much on creating new programs but on creating several small but strategic and sustainable changes within already existing programs to establish a new way of doing ministry in the culture of the congregation. Both sets of strategies have brought encouraging results. The leadership of adolescent ministries is working from a framework guiding their teaching and programming to more concisely focus on the core aspects of adolescent development and discipleship. Adult leaders are engaging young people with a greater confidence in their role and greater clarity in the support they are offering. There is some measure of increased awareness of the needs of adolescents in the minds of adults and a new sense of shared responsibility for their discipleship across a broader span of the congregation. Many teens have been welcomed into new opportunities for them to serve and lead alongside adults in the congregation. This kind of growing engagement is a tangible expression of what it means for the church to function as family, embracing adolescents as adopted younger brothers and sisters who need encouragement and support but who also have a great deal to contribute to the mission of the church. This kind of engagement offers young people sources of support that contribute to the formation of their identity, belonging, and autonomy as disciples of Jesus Christ. In essence, this is how the church



must embrace young people if it intends to nurture in them a life of discipleship in the community of faith.

The calling for this congregation, and for countless others like it, is to continue to return to a biblical picture of the church as the spiritual family embodying God's adoption of new brothers and sisters who have been redeemed by Christ and claimed as God's own children. And then it must continue to refocus its teaching, mentoring, and encouraging of its young people around the themes of identity, belonging, and autonomy. For every adolescent out there, just as for every adult, the fullness of life God intends will never be theirs until they find who they truly are in Christ, until they experience just how deeply they belong to God and to his Church, and until they discover their purpose and calling in contributing to God's mission in their world. Offering young people the care and support they need to grow into this fullness of maturity and wholeness God intends for every disciple is perhaps the most rewarding investment the church could make for the ministry and mission of Christ in the world.

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