

Ministry with Youth

Rev. Grant Knepper

Youth ministry can be one of the most rewarding areas in church work; after all, Luther himself called youth the “fount and seed of the church.” Working with youth is working with the future of the Church. Today’s youth are tomorrow’s pastors, teachers, and congregational leaders, and being a part of their spiritual formation is a joy and a privilege. What you do in the here and now has a direct influence on what they will do in the then and there.

At the same time, youth ministry can be one of the most challenging areas as well, especially for those who work with high school youth. To be sure, the teen years are not the easiest time in a person’s life. There will be a lot of things going on the lives of your youth. In addition to church activities, there are also a myriad of other things that they spend their time doing. School, sports, part-time jobs, and family obligations alone can fill their schedules to the breaking point.

As if this were not enough, your youth also have to juggle all these activities at the same time that their bodies are making drastic and seemingly inexplicable changes as their physical maturity outpaces their emotional maturity. They have little control over their schedules and even less control over their bodies. The raging distractions of the present and the temporal can make any contemplation of the future and the eternal difficult at best. It is no wonder that so many teenagers seem to have questions about who they are.

Identity can be a troublesome issue for anyone, but it can be especially confusing for youth. The confusion arises because your youth, for the most part, are given their identities by others. They are given identities by their families, by their teachers, and especially by their peers. This causes a lot of stress. Unfortunately, for most youth, they are trying to shed a bad identity, live up to a good identity, and establish an identity independent of the labels put on them by others all at the same time.

As your youth navigate the difficult waters, one particular area of identity can make all the difference for them: baptismal identity. In their Baptisms, God called

each of your youth by name, washed them clean of sin, and recreated them as believers. In the waters of Baptism, they encountered the living God and received the gift of faith. In Baptism, they were united with Christ. The benefits of the cross were applied to them, and their eternal lives began. In their Baptisms, they were given an identity as children of God.

With so much of their lives still before them, baptismal identity gives your youth something in the present to hang onto. It is an identity that is given them by God Himself, it is something that they did not have to do anything to get, and it is something that no one can take away from them. Baptismal identity is not subject to the whims of their family or friends. It is not dependent on athletic ability, brain power, or fashion sense. It is what it is, and it is always there.

In a highly transitory time of life, baptismal identity is something that is permanent. Remember your own days as a teenager. Are you the same person now that you were then? Much of what our youth are today will be left behind as they become adults. Baptismal identity, on the other hand, is something that is a part of their lives forever. No matter who they become, they remain children of God. In times of temptation, in times of testing, and when God seems far away, baptismal identity can serve as a powerful reminder that Jesus is with them always.

At a time when most of their lives are lived under the constraints of peer pressure, parental expectation, and educational responsibilities, baptismal identity is the Gospel that breaks the tyranny of the Law. While others are telling them who they should be, their Baptisms remind them of who they already are.

You have a great opportunity to remind your youth of their Baptisms and to show them who they are in God's eyes. And, in turning your youth back to their Baptisms, you also have the chance to remember your own.

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