

The spiritual life of teenagers

By Sharon Pearson

Would you consider the youth programs in your congregation “spiritual?” Often a Sunday morning class or forum is offered to middle or high school students emphasizing learning about the Bible, God and beliefs with a little mix of how to apply it to one’s daily life.



Traditionally, most church youth ministries have centered around the “youth group” model of activities, games and pizza that seek to entertain the current values of the youth culture. According to research from Meier, Ratcliff & Rowe (1995), teenagers see through that façade and thus the churches that are most likely to keep their teens into adulthood are those that stand against the general culture.

Fitting into the world

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a noted sociologist, believes that as young adolescents grow, they will, consciously and unconsciously, begin searching for opportunities for “awakening.” They’ll feel an inner yearning, a “call.” A young person may hear the “call” during a time of solitude, perhaps laying in bed at night and wonder, with great intensity and anxiety, about how he will fit into the world.

“The universe is so big and I am so small — what does all this mean? How do I fit into this world? What will I do when I grow up? Who am I?” With the increase of pilgrimages, mission trips, contemplative prayer, labyrinth walks, candles, icons and Taizè worship, leaders are now realizing that the experiential aspects of faith, often termed “spirituality,” is at the heart of ministry with youth. This is in part because it meets young people where they are: searching for an identity while yearning to make a difference in the world and learning to turn from personal self-centeredness toward greater communion with God.

Less likely to be in trouble

Young people who say spirituality is very important to them are also less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. Kenda Creasy Dean and others, in their extensive study about youth and religion, challenge the assumption that youth prefer something new and postmodern.

The research reminds us that there are many youth in (or around the edges of) our congregations and these are the youth looking to us as their spiritual mentors. For example, “We were astounded by the realization that for many teens we interviewed, it

seemed as if our interview was the first time any adult had ever asked them what they believed.”

Engage them in conversation

Spirituality emphasizes awe, wonder and other experiences that are beyond the mundane and connect the individual to something transcendent, of ultimate importance. With many teens (as well as adults), spirituality can include experiences with God, but it can also include awe and wonder in day to day life as well. Youth ARE spiritual beings; we just need to engage them in the conversation.

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