Cultivating Healthy Youth Ministry Environments—Getting Beyond Our Current Box

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Rapid transitions within culture, and a delayed response to these changes, continues to create a loss of connection between many churches and youth. The ensuing result is that several youth are leaving, concluding that we have little to offer their world. In my zealous quest to address this, I've participated and led efforts to think "outside the box." It seems that paradigms comfortable and familiar a decade ago are now becoming obsolete in a rapidly shifting culture driven by technological innovation. Typically, when this occurs, we engage in two common responses. One is to remain committed to our known paradigms (staying "in the box"), hoping to keep our youth engaged by simply altering a few methods. The second involves abandoning the known and paving a new avenue altogether ("outside the box"). Bill Easum and Dave Travis address this reality in their book, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches That Work.*[1] Since many approaches aren't "working," this caught my attention. Easum and Travis identify three types of "church thinking"—"in the box," "out of the box," and "beyond the box." "In the box" thinking represents churches that are stuck and, as a result, dying. "Out of the box" churches often thrive and grow, but are challenged to find a sense of identity within constant change. Easum and Travis refer to "beyond the box" churches as those which are radically innovative, property agnostic, constantly pursuing opportunity, and mission-minded with a kingdom-oriented vision. These churches foster new ministry, reproduce themselves through multiplication, train and send out leaders, embrace change, operate by flexible guidelines, disciple servants, and equip culture. Cultivating these attributes within our church environments is absolutely essential in our quest for healthy youth ministry.

Creating vibrant youth ministries of great impact must become first priority within our churches should revitalization be fully realized within the RCA. We must rethink youth ministry, moving not just outside the box, but beyond the box, preparing youth as servant leaders who redeem and positively impact culture. Such a transition will not occur overnight, but requires a patient, long-term vision and commitment.

The Lily Foundation has begun to release funding for several youth ministries studies.[2] Initial results have begun to shed light on our journey forward. One such study entitled "The Exemplary Youth Ministry Project" identifies 44 "Faith Assets" that provide congregations a measuring tool to gage their youth ministry health (or potential health). These research findings are organized into two major areas—congregational life and youth ministry—within eight asset groupings. These include:

- Faith Maturity
- Pastoral Leadership Strength

- Congregational Characteristics
- Youth Involvement
- Youth Minister Strength
- Youth and Adult Leadership
- Youth Ministry Effectiveness
- Family Involvement

131 churches were surveyed and 21 churches extensively examined to determine what assets led to their youth ministry health. Ultimately, the more assets a congregation possesses, the greater their youth ministry results. The following is a brief outline of the 44 assets:

Faith Maturity (of the Congregation)

- *God's Living Presence*: The congregation possesses a sense of God's living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service.
- *Centrality of Faith*: It recognizes and participates in God's sustaining and transforming life and work.
- *Emphasis on Prayer*: It practices the presence of God as individuals and as a community through prayer and worship.
- *Focus on Discipleship*: It is committed to knowing and following Jesus Christ.
- *Emphasis on Scripture*: It values the authority of Scripture in its life and mission.
- *Centrality of Mission*: It consistently witnesses, serves, and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice.

Pastoral Leadership

- *Spiritual Influence:* The pastor knows and models the transforming presence of God in life and ministry.
- *Interpersonal Competence*: He or she builds a sense of community and relates well with adults and youth.
- *Supports Youth Ministry*: He or she understands, guides, and advocates for youth ministry.
- *Supports Leaders:* He or she affirms and mentors youth and adults leading youth ministry.

Congregational Qualities

- *Supports Youth Ministry*: Youth and ministry with young people are high priorities for the congregation.
- *Demonstrates Hospitality*: The congregation values and welcomes all people, especially youth.

- *Strives for Excellence*: It sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement.
- *Encourages Thinking*: It welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life.
- *Creates Community*: It reflects high-quality personal and group relationships.
- *Encourages Support Groups*: It engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life.
- *Promotes Worship*: It expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship through the congregation's life.
- *Fosters Ethical Responsibility*: It encourages individual and social responsibility.
- *Promotes Service*: It sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally.
- *Demonstrates Effective Practices*: It engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities.

Youth Involvement

- *Participate in the Congregation*: Youth are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices.
- *Assume Ministry Leadership*: Youth are invited to, as well as equipped and affirmed for, leadership in congregational activities.

Youth Minister Strength

- *Provides Competent Leadership*: The youth minister evidences superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill in leadership.
- *Models Faith*: He or she is a role model reflecting a living faith for youth and adults.
- *Mentors Faith Life*: He or she assists adult leaders and youth in their faith-life both one-on-one and in groups.
- *Develops Teams*: He or she reflects clear vision and attracts gifted youth and adults into leadership.
- *Knows Youth*: He or she knows youth and changes in youth culture and utilizes these understandings in ministry.
- *Establishes Effective Relationships*: He or she enjoys effective relationships with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff.

Youth and Adult Leadership

- *Equip for Peer Ministry*: Youth practice friendship, care-giving, and outreach with respect to one another, supported by training and caring adults.
- *Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring*: Supported by informed leadership, adults engage youth in faith and life.

- *Participate in Training*: Leadership evaluates and equips youth and adults for ministry in an atmosphere of high expectations.
- *Possess Vibrant Faith*: Youth and adult leaders possess and practice a vital and informed faith.
- *Competent Adult Volunteers*: Volunteers foster authentic relationships and effective practices with youth with a clear vision strengthened by training and support.

Youth Ministry Effectiveness

- *Establishes a Caring Environment*: The ministry provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging.
- *Develops Quality Relationships*: The youth minister develops authentic relationships among youth and adults, establishing an environment of presence and life engagement.
- *Focus on Jesus Christ*: The life and ministry of Jesus inspires the ministry's mission, practices, and relationships.
- *Considers Life Issues*: The full range of young people's lives is valued and addressed.
- *Uses Many Approaches*: The ministry intentionally and creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to its mission and context
- *Organizes Well*: It engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations.

Family Involvement

- *Possess Strong Parental Faith*: Parent(s) possess and practice a vital and informed faith.
- *Promote Family Faith Practices*: Parent(s) engage youth and family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.
- *Reflect Family Harmony*: Through expressions of respect and love, parent(s) create an atmosphere promoting faith.
- *Equip Parents*: The ministry offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parent(s) for nurturing faith at home.
- *Foster Parent-Youth Relationships:* Ministry offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.

The study encourages leadership teams to brainstorm potential strategies for further developing each "faith asset" and to create specific action plans. Additionally, the study suggests that timelines should be set to measure the effective implementation and effectiveness of each once strategies have been initiated.[3]

Studies and assessments such as "The Exemplary Youth Ministry Project" provide helpful tools for moving youth ministries from surviving to thriving. However, as with any resource, understanding the unique nature and personality of a congregation is necessary to effectively adapt the tool to ensure relevance. Therefore, this tool (like others) will only be as effective as our ability to adapt the content to our distinctive character as the RCA. For this reason, a concerted effort will be undertaken in 2009 to unpack this and other Lily-funded studies and adapt them to our unique needs. As efforts are engaged by the Discipleship Youth Team (DYT) and regional Synod offices, the results of these studies as well as additional resources will be uploaded at various sites for electronic access by pastors and youth leaders.[4] Likewise, members of the DYT and other experienced youth pastors are available to present these tools through seminars and workshops at your location.[5]

An unprecedented opportunity exists to re-think youth ministry in the RCA, ultimately cultivating environments that create and sustain lasting results. Should we succeed, we'll not only produce effective servant leaders for now and the future, but also a vital component in our goal toward healthy revitalization.

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[1]William E. Easum and Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box: Innovative Churches That Work* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003) 9.

[2] The Exemplar Youth Ministry Study, www.exemplarym.org (accessed: 17 February 2009).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Resources developed through the Great Lakes Synod may be found at www.rcayouthgl.org.

[5] For more information, contact me at duane@rcayouthgl.org.