

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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## A Reader's Guide to Youth Ministry

Jeremy D. Smith  
jds04d@acu.edu

Steve Bonner  
*Lipscomb University*, [steve.bonner@lipscomb.edu](mailto:steve.bonner@lipscomb.edu)

Walter Surdacki  
*Lipscomb University*, [walter.surdacki@lipscomb.edu](mailto:walter.surdacki@lipscomb.edu)

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## A Reader's Guide to Youth Ministry

*Jeremy Smith, Steven Bonner, and Walter Surdacki*

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*Abstract: Youth ministry scholarship over the past 20 years has offered an array of works impactful to scholars, parents, church leaders, and youth workers. Because of the growing number of robust writings, we have compiled an annotated bibliography intended to guide this wide range of readers in an overview of the most impactful works for youth ministry scholarship and practice.*

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Youth ministry has become a fundamental program in many churches today. More than ever, church leaders are seeing the need for strong youth programs that support families in their task of developing lasting faith in today's adolescents. Parents are seeking programs that will support their efforts to establish discipleship and faithful living in their children. Youth workers are no longer content with conversations that reduce youth ministry only to topics of curriculum, programming, or events. Instead, many are seeking a more profound discussion over the context and quality of adolescent faith as well as approaches to youth ministry that are both practical and theological.

Over the past 20 years, youth ministry research has flourished, providing youth workers with a thoughtful, practical conversation on the spiritual lives of today's young people. Developments in psychology, youth culture, education, technological research, adolescent development, family ministry, and spiritual formation have laid the groundwork for youth ministry programs that nurture adolescent faith. Other works have offered fresh ways of thinking theologically about youth ministry programming to help both new and experienced youth ministers develop synergy and intentionality in their programs. This cross-discipline dialogue has ushered in a new era for both youth ministry research and programming.

As both youth ministers and educators, we have listed the works that have been most impactful to our programs as well as those that we think

benefit youth workers in understanding the context and theological purpose of youth ministry. Though the works individually are not arranged in any particular order of significance other than alphabetically, the entire selection is laid out thematically to help the reader navigate the collection. Each section offers a brief introduction to the wider conversation that has been taking place in youth ministry before providing an annotated bibliography. We also realize that youth ministry books tend to be written to a large audience from a wide range of backgrounds. We have tried to identify the intended audience of each work by adding the tags "Scholar," "Minister," "Parents," or "Leadership." While we believe each of these works is crucial for the youth ministry, at the end we list the top ten works that we consider essential for the youth ministry conversation.

### Youth Ministry Research

Perhaps one of the most encouraging areas that have developed over the past 20 years is that of research in the area of youth ministry and adolescents' spiritual development. The Association of Youth Ministry Educators (AYME) has developed a place for scholars to share their research in the field. AYME produces *The Journal of Youth Ministry* that curates peer-reviewed articles on a variety of areas associated with ministry to young people. The National Study of Youth and Religion headed by Christian Smith has served as a catalyst and the gold standard for research in the area of religiosity in adolescents and emerging adults. One must also mention the Barna Institute who have turned their attention in recent years towards adolescents and young adults in their research and surveys. These are just a few of many different examples of the growing body of research that is devoted to not only how to do youth ministry, but why? The result is a growing body of research to which youth workers can look to improve the effectiveness of their ministry with adolescents in the church.

Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. [Scholar/Minister] Kenda Dean takes the findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion and answers the question, "So what?" Her goal is to speak to practitioners in the church about the significance of the findings from the NSYAR and what youth workers ought to do with this information. The dense findings of the NYSAR can be arduous to work through, but it gives readers a helpful handle on the research for their work with teens in a local setting." Dean identifies four factors adolescents need for a lasting

faith: a personal encounter with God, a strong church or youth group, a sense of being called to duty, and hope for the future.

Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] Kinnaman and Barna take their research skills and turn them towards young adults who have left the church and ask the question, "Why?" What results are six important categories that the church and youth workers need to pay attention to in order to stem the growing tide of those leaving church to become part of the "Nones," those who claim no church or faith affiliation. They are the fastest-growing segment of the population in America in the past decade. Kinnaman discovered six areas in which churches are falling short, including overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive and doubtless.

Kinnaman, Dave, and Mark Matlock. *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] *Faith for Exiles* is the latest report from the Barna Group, a think tank that focuses on current trends in church and faith. This time, the Barna Institute identifies five characteristics of adolescents who keep their faith into adulthood. Based on a multi-phase project targeting 18 to 29-year-olds, *Faith for Exiles* draws data from almost two dozen telephone and online surveys. These surveys featured primarily U.S. adults but also surveyed clergy and young adults ranging from 13 to 30. *Faith for Exiles* is an attempt to help church leaders understand what resilient discipleship looks like, to define characteristics that help sustain faithfulness to Christ, and to draw a road map for church leaders to address common shortcomings of faith communities as we train and equip emerging adults.

Martinson, Roland, Wes Black, and John Roberto. *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. St. Paul, MN: EYM, 2010. [Scholar/Minister] Martinson, Black, and Roberto present the findings from the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry, a research project that identifies practices and approaches for developing ministry with young people today. The richest part of the research examines seven characteristics of vibrant faith in adolescents: seeking spiritual growth, possessing a vital faith, practicing faith in community,

making the Christian faith a way of life, living a life of service, exercising moral responsibility, and possessing a positive spirit. In addition, it also examines qualities of congregations, youth ministry programs, family life, and church leaderships that nurture adolescent faith.

Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [Scholar/Minister] *Soul Searching* presents the findings from Phase 1 (of three) from the National Study of Youth and Religion, a longitudinal study to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth. Drawing upon thousands of data points, *Soul Searching* discovers the vital role adults play in the successful discipling of teens into adult believers. NSYAR conducted thousands of phone and live interviews with teens from a wide variety of backgrounds to help identify practices that are effective in the moral and social formation of adolescents' spirituality.

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2009. [Scholar] Christian Smith presents the findings from Phase 2 (of three) from the National Study of Youth and Religion. Continuing to follow their original sample, *Souls in Transition* continues their findings, focusing more upon adolescents entering emerging adulthood.

### **Adolescent Development**

The transition from childhood to adolescence brings about significant changes in physical development, cognitive advances, and social expectations. Understanding these changes have always been important for effective ministry to adolescents. Prior to the 1990s, the journey of adolescence was generally understood to occur in two stages: early, which corresponded to junior high, and late, which corresponded to high school. Significant cultural factors, however, ushered in an entirely new stage of development, the middle stage. Mid-adolescence, which corresponded to high school, eventually pushed "late adolescence" into the college years.

Adolescence, like life in general, is not static. Internal and external forces continue to act on this age group, both lengthening the journey and complicating the adolescent terrain. Not only is adolescence starting earlier, it is taking longer for adolescents to transition into adulthood. Some

theorists claim that emerging adulthood is the result. Add to this lengthening, multiple-selves, identity confusion, objectification, and a host of other issues and concerns; one finds that fluency in adolescent development is crucial for any ministry (education) with adolescents.

Balswick, Pamela King, and Kevin Reimer. *The Reciprocating Self*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016. [Scholar/Minister] This edition thoroughly updates the first, which was published in 2005. The purpose of this book, according to the authors, is to present “an integrated view of human development that is based on social science research and biblical truths.” Their book is the result of what they perceive to be a lack of a working teleology in writing on development. This book is helpful in that it effectively integrates a thoroughgoing trinitarian theology to questions of human development. They refer to this as reciprocating relationships. With the theological foundations set, they then apply this thinking across the lifespan, and then draw applications for ministry.

Elkind, David. *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2001. [Minister/Parent] Elkind’s third edition is a must introductory read to quickly grasp the difficulties facing youth today. His first edition was published in 1981, the second in 1988 and unfortunately, he claims, things have only gotten worse. Parents are under tremendous pressure to hurry their children and adolescents into adulthood. When you combine this with the ubiquitous presence of media and entertainment, and all the developmental issues that ensue, parents find themselves in a particularly difficult place. Elkind unpacks the dynamics of hurrying in children and then how these dynamics are realized with parents, schools, the media, and then technology in general. Part two of the book explores the impact that this phenomenon has on children. Though nearly twenty years old, this book is an important early read in one’s journey to develop a developmental acumen.

Harter, Susan. *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective*. 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press, 2012. [Scholar] One of the most important and challenging developmental markers to understand in adolescence, is the reality of multiple selves. Harter’s book is the definitive academic engagement of the topic. In this book, she brings to bear conceptual, empirical, and methodological advances for

understanding the development of the self, from early childhood through adolescence and emerging adulthood. In chapter one, she lays out the most contemporary thinking on self-development. The chapters that follow apply this thinking to childhood, adolescence, and then emerging adulthood. The later chapters explore various topics related, generally, to self-concept. This book is a highly technical engagement with current psychosocial research. However, the careful and persistent reader will profit tremendously and walk away with the developmental and sociocultural foundations of the construction of the human self.

Haidt, Jonathan, Greg Lukianoff, et al. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019. [Scholar] If you are looking at a good description of some of the generational differences that exist in today's emerging adult and late adolescents then this text is for you. Haidt and Lukianoff uncover several of the different myths this generation has been raised on that have not worked to their advantage. Myths like, "What doesn't kill you only makes you weaker" and "The untruth of emotional reasoning." While this could be a diatribe on everything that is wrong with this generation, the authors do a good job of detailing how adults have contributed to these myths as well as offer suggestions on how to correct them. Youth ministers would be well served paying attention to their observations and discerning how they may contribute to these myths as well as determining strategies and theologies they can use to combat this phenomenon.

O'Keefe, Theresa. *Navigating toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents*. New York: Paulist Press, 2018. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] In our estimation, this is one of the most important books printed in the last couple of decades on ministry with adolescents. O'Keefe's book navigates different waters than similarly themed books. It is a theologically rich treatment of the journey towards adulthood that utilizes a sailing metaphor to mentor the reader on the most effective way to read the winds of culture and interpret the deep waters of relationships. O'Keefe's definition of adulthood is "the capacity to be responsible within the context of relationships." Adolescence, then, is the process of transforming from an instrumental to a relational engagement with the world, by "recognizing the

personhood of others” and “recognizing and living into relationships with others.” Rooted in a theology of personhood, O’Keefe engages the many scholars she cites as conversation partners, whose expertise span theology, philosophy, sociology, and development.

### **Youth Ministry and Technology**

Perhaps one of the most visible changes in youth ministry in the past 20 years has been the effect that technology, the internet, and social media have had upon adolescent development and spirituality. The ubiquity of the smartphone and the constant draw for the attention of the adolescent has undoubtedly been one of the main sources of angst and worry about the generation for both youth workers and parents. The *modus operandi* in American culture has seemed to quickly incorporate the newest emerging technology and incorporate it into one’s rhythm of life without asking the question, “Should we?” This section provides great resources to help both youth workers and parents navigate those difficult questions that technology’s invasion has thrust upon us.

Boyd, Danah. *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014. [Scholar/Minister] Danah Boyd investigates the impact that social media has had upon today’s networked teens. She ponders what effects being constantly connected has had upon today’s teens both socially and emotionally. She painstakingly details the rise of social networks has had on the cultural landscape of adolescent culture. For example, she details the difference between being in public and being public. This is a must-read to help youth pastors establish some language that is more than, “God is good, social media/tech is bad.” Boyd allows for the reader to ponder higher issues at play that one must consider when helping adolescents navigate the terrain of technology and relationships in markedly positive ways.

Detweiler, Craig. *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013. [Minister] Detweiler is a big fan of technology and recognizes the challenges that constant connection can have upon the soul of the Christian. *iGods* is an attempt to reconcile this challenge and help the believer navigate towards a more flourishing life that includes technology. He recognizes that we must never substitute the online life and persona for one that is lived



incarnationally. He professes that we are embodied humans who must engage life that exists offline. The temptation is to allow our internet-connected lives to shield us from the difficult things of life like pain, suffering, and loss that are integral parts of the lived Christian experience. This is a great read to help teach students to look away from their screens and at each other.

Turkel, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. [Minister/Parent] MIT Social scientist and early tech adopter, Sherry Turkel, looks at the division that social media has created in our interpersonal relationships. Turkel observes how simple technologies like text messaging and social media “likes” have substituted for real, authentic connections with others. As a result, we have adapted to rely on far less in our relationships that we were designed for. This is where Turkel ends and the theologian/minister picks up. *Alone Together* provides the youth worker the background language to help their teens and parents identify why 300 likes on an Instagram post does not satisfy the soul or why a text message is not the same as a face to face (incarnation) encounter.

Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2015. [Minister/Parent] Instead of demonizing technology, Zirschky provides helpful insight into the role that technology plays in the life of an adolescent. His insights help one understand the different, and sometimes deep, spiritual needs that social media and virtual connections fill in the soul of an adolescent. This helps those working with teens not be so heavy-handed in their rules with technology that may work against the youth worker trying to implement them. Zirschky offers a way that the church can, and must, respond to these needs for it is his assertion that the healthy faith community is the best place to meet these deep-seated needs.

Crouch, Andy. *The Techwise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017. [Minister/Parent] This primer for parents provides a basic set of spiritual disciplines that a family and a youth group can implement to keep technology in its proper place. Crouch weaves personal stories, biblical principles, and practical suggestions that can be used to allow

technology to be a tool and not a master in our lives. It gives several concrete practices and disciplines that parents and youth workers can use to help teens develop flourishing lives with technology.

### Youth Ministry and Culture

Since the word “youth” became mainstream in 1970s America, sociologists, psychologists, and youth ministry professionals have been thinking critically about what it means to minister to youth in a rapidly changing cultural milieu. No one can deny that culture has changed and with it, the rapid creation and dissemination of a unique youth subculture. As youth ministry practitioners began to take seriously the opportunity and call on their lives to minister to this age group, questions quickly surfaced about the unique culture that they were immersed in.

Today, no one bats an eye when they hear the phrase, *youth culture*. It has nearly become so synonymous with youth ministry that folks hardly give it a second thought. Therein lies the problem. Effective ministry must take into consideration the nuances present in this subculture. Like all cultural study, knowledge of youth culture provides windows of insight and opportunity into what shapes and forms adolescents today. With such knowledge and insight, competent and responsive programming can be developed to more adequately meet youth where they are.

Clark, Chap. *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] Chap Clark has been a staple voice in youth ministry education for well over two decades. In *Hurt 2.0*, Clark thoroughly updates his first edition that was published in 2004. Clark's book serves as a grounding orientation into the world of today's adolescents. Clark tackles the changing face of adolescence. That is, he explores, first, what he refers to as the defining issue for adolescents today: abandonment. With that defined, he explains the “world beneath” and then spends the rest of the book exploring the contours of the world beneath: peers, sports, family, school, sex, ethics, and more. Clark's book is rooted in excellent sociological research that is then couched in careful historic critique. This book is a must-read for any adult who seeks to understand the adolescent landscape.

Erwin, Pamela. *A Critical Approach to Youth Culture: Its Influence and Implications for Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. [Scholar/Minister] Effective ministry to adolescents must take into

account their culture. It has been said that adolescents have, over time, created a unique and distinct culture that is always shifting and changing. Erwin's book is the only youth ministry-focused book that utilizes principles of ethnography in consideration of its influence and implications for youth ministry. In part one, Erwin explores culture and those signs, symbols, rituals, and language that express culture. Part two dives into the ethnography of culture and explains, at length, what this means for youth pastors as ethnographers. Parts three and four broaden her exploration to the ecologies of culture, that is, she explores the various ecologies that shape and form adolescents and finally, theologies of culture. Anyone who has been engaged in the work of ministry to adolescents over time understands how fast culture changes. This book helps its readers develop the necessary ethnographic acumen to understand those changes.

Kageler, Len. *Youth Ministry in a Multifaith Society: Forming Christian Identity Among Skeptics, Syncretists and Sincere Believers of Other Faiths*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] Our culture is rapidly becoming one in which our youth experience a multitude of faith traditions on any given day. Our churches have not really done a good job of helping its teens navigate this multifaith society. Syncretism, then, is often the result or as Kageler claims, "our Christology [gets] fuzzy." Kaegler offers a genuinely unique contribution for parents and churches that wades into waters that are neglected and misunderstood.

Root, Andrew. *Faith Formation in The Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness (Ministry in a Secular Age)*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017. [Scholar] In this first of three in a series, Root delves into the tedious and monumental work of philosopher Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Taylor's use of secular, does not imply absence of religion, but rather a cultural reality in which all belief systems are suspect. In such a system of thought, Root explores what this new reality means for faith formation. Specifically, Root seeks to respond to the church's obsession with youthfulness by offering a sociologically and theologically in-depth critique and response to shaping the faith of the emerging generation. Part one of the book lays the foundation of this critique by exploring the age of authenticity and the challenge of forming faith. In part two, Root

responds theologically by exploring and then applying Paul's ministry to the reality of a secular age. This book is thoroughly academic, but worth the time if one is willing and able to take the time to engage it.

Twenge, Jean M. *IGEN: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York: Atria Books, 2017. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] The most recent generational cohort, often called GenZ, is referred to as iGen by Twenge. Twenge has been studying generational cohorts for twenty-five years and in this work, she presents her sociological understanding of iGen. The subtitle of this book might seem long and a bit obnoxious, however, as the reader turns the pages, one begins to understand why. Twenge, unlike so many others, supports her work with research. She does, of course, begin her study by couching this generational cohort with the larger work of Strauss and Howe, but the rest of the book methodically unpacks just who these young people are: insecure, irreligious, insulated but not intrinsic, in no hurry, and indefinite to name a few. Anyone who wants to know more about this iGen will profit from reading this easily accessible book.

### **Theological Approaches to Youth Ministry**

One of Dean Borgman's first books was *When Kumbaya Is Not enough*. He was right. As important as relationships and songs are, youth ministry requires deeper theological thinking. For years, youth ministry fell under the umbrella of Christian Education. Conferences relegated the study and practice of youth ministry as merely the practical outworking of theology proper. However, with the emergence of the national Association of Youth Ministry Educators (AYME) some thirty years ago and the (re)emergence of practical theology as a discipline, a shift began to take place as youth ministry scholars began to see their efforts as practical theology proper.

In time, books began to surface that took this new approach very seriously. It was understood that programmatic-driven youth ministry was neither effective nor desirable. Youth Ministry that was driven by the calendar lacked depth, insight, and theological rationale for its existence. It lacked cohesive and interdisciplinary conversations with other disciplines. In short, it lacked a practical theological approach. The books that follow remedy that deficiency and provide the reader with a rich exposure to a broader and more in-depth way of engaging youth in today's world.

Borgman, Dean. *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. [Scholar/Minister] Borgman is one of the longest-tenured thinkers of youth ministry in the world. In this updated edition, Borgman provides a thorough grounding of youth ministry in practical theology. In part one, he moves from a basic introduction of youth ministry, through a discussion of the art and practice of interpretation, to a practical theology for youth ministry. Part two explores a theology of persons. Here Borgman unpacks his theology of growth and development, personhood, and community, family, and peers, and finally, sexuality. Part three explores a practical theology of culture and part four closes the book out with a practical theology of holistic youth ministry. This book is a one-stop-shop on a practical theology of youth ministry from someone who has been thinking theologically about youth ministry for the better part of four decades.

Griffiths, Steve. *Models for Youth Ministry: Learning from the Life of Christ*. London: SPCK, 2013. [Scholar/Minister] Steve Griffiths' *Models for Youth Ministry* offers a strong theological framework for youth ministry by taking classic approaches to youth ministry, such as relational ministry, and examining them through the life and ministry of Jesus. Where many theological approaches to youth ministry center on the incarnation as the sole guiding point for youth ministry practice, Griffiths argues for a more holistic Christology. He establishes this Christology by imagining relational ministry through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and eschatology of Jesus. This holistic Christology is rooted in what Griffiths calls "kairos-events," brief encounters that have eternal significance.

Jacober, Amy. *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011. [Minister] Anyone who teaches youth ministry knows that it is important to train ministers in an interdisciplinary approach. To be effective, youth ministers ought to be conversant in practical theology, culture, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Jacober's book steps into that interdisciplinary tension and offers a book that helps its readers navigate this reality. She starts her book by grounding her work in

practical theology by exploring trinitarian, Christological, and transformational theology. She then begins exploring the overlapping spheres of adolescent development, youth culture, and various influences that impinge on adolescents as they develop.

Ketcham, Sharon. *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community Where Faith Flourishes Beyond High School*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018. [Minister/Parent] Many have wondered and written about why the rising generations are leaving the church after being actively involved in youth ministry programming, however, few have actually reflected theologically on how to respond. Ketcham, an emerging voice in youth ministry education, tackles this important topic by offering fresh insight on youth ministry, ecclesiology, and the importance of Christian practices within the community of faith. Ketcham argues from the start that current youth ministry practices are not consistently supporting a faith post-graduation. She understands that relationships in church require push and pull, that is, motions of reciprocal action. The center of her argument is found in her unpacking those values that involve a reciprocating motion among people: memory, mutuality, contribution, and maturity. This is an important work for those who understand that youth ministry is a ministry of *withness*, and as such, requires a rethinking of programming, values, and practices.

Root, Andrew. *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry: A Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. [Scholar/Minister] This little book is the first in a series of bite-sized conversations from Root about what it looks like to think theologically about youth ministry. This book (and the ones that follow) take the reader on a fictional journey with Nadia, a youth minister called to ministry who wonders if what she is doing is actually making a difference. Root's penetrating insights and theological acumen are brought to bear on the day-in and day-out experiences of youth ministry, which will help you see youth ministry and theology in a new light.

Root, Andrew. *The End of Youth Ministry: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. [Scholar/Minister] This is perhaps one of the most honest looks at the challenges contemporary

youth ministry holds. Root brings much of the research he has been doing with Charles Taylor and the effects this new secularism has upon the field of youth ministry. One of the most revealing and honest observations he raises is how mainly, middle-class parents have approached youth group as just another “good” in a buffet of goods that are available in society that all contribute to the rearing of teenagers. Youth group is simply one of those competing goods that often loses out to youth sports, academics, jobs, etc. One of the larger questions the reader is left with is how has youth ministry presented itself as an invaluable or necessary good?

Synod of Bishops. “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment” *XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*. Oct. 2018. [Scholar/Minister/Leadership] In 2018, Pope Francis called together the Synod of Bishops to examine issues related to faith among young people. It was the first major gathering of the Synods to focus on young people in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. The document is a comprehensive frame of reference developed after two years of listening and investigating the specific challenges facing today’s young people. The document itself utilizes the Emmaus Road story (cf. Lk 24:13-35) as a *Lectio Divina* roadmap for the church’s engagement with young people. The final document is broken into three parts. The first part, titled “He Walked with Them,” is a call for church leaders to understand and sympathize with the specific challenges facing today’s young people. The second part, titled “Their Eyes Were Opened,” examines the unique contributions young people offer the church. Finally, part three, titled “They Set off Without Delay,” is a call for church leaders to embrace a renewed missionary effort toward young people. The overall document offers a great framework for how church leaders can start a discussion about ministering to young people in their own context.

### **Helpful Youth Ministry Programing**

Youth Ministry writings in the early '80s and '90s primarily focused on program development, curriculum resources, and “how-to” books. Youth ministers were seeking a type of method that would be the silver bullet to developing faith in young people. Looking back, it seems like any person with an apparently successful youth program was writing articles or books putting forward their method. What developed was a type of

program obsession that ultimately led to calendar cramming events, fueled by the belief that quantity is better than quality.

Today we understand that no two youth programs are alike. We know that what might work for one youth group does not necessarily mean it will work for another. While youth ministry writings today are still filled with “how-to” books, the difference between these writings and earlier writings is the focus on intentionality and quality. Many of the books below offer not a specific type of method but instead identify healthy characteristics that should be a part of every program regardless of method.

Chancey, Dudley, and Bruner, Ron. *Owning Faith: Reimagining the Role of Church and Family in the Faith Journey of Teenagers*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2017. [Minister/Parent] Striving toward a more congregational and intergenerational model of youth ministry, Chancey and Bruner mine those whose careers have been immersed in youth ministry to address a variety of issues related to intergenerational youth ministry. *Owning Faith* draws upon ministers, professors, and scholars to address issues such as mentorship, human sexuality, adoptive parenting, and discernment to help equip youth workers to address often overlooked aspects of ministry.

Clark, Chap. Ed. *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016. [Scholar/Minister/Parent] *Adoptive Youth Ministry* was intentionally marketed as the first youth ministry textbook to be published since *Starting Right* in 2001. Much of Clark’s project in recent years has been about how the church might effectively integrate the emerging generations into the family of faith. He, like many, was concerned about the reports of youth people leaving the church after graduation. His response to this was the theological concept of adoption. That is, what would it look like if the local church took seriously its responsibility to *adopt* the youth of the church. In *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, Clark brings together a diverse group of scholars and practitioners to reflect practically and theologically about this revisioning of youth ministry in the local church. Part one explores the context, part two reflects on the particular call, part three focuses on the practices, and part four ties it all together by arguing for the skills of adoptive youth ministry. This book is ambitious as it seeks to and successfully articulates a particular



theological approach to youth ministry through a broad array of voices. Clark adroitly edits these diverse voices together into a unified voice that gives weight to the underlying theological claims of the book.

Clark, Chap. ed. *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. [Minister] *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century* offers ministers five different approaches to youth ministry: The Gospel Advancing View, The Reformed View, The Adoption View, The Ecclesial View, and the D6 View. Each view is presented by a different author, followed by a brief critique from the other authors. The views are presented with compelling insight and practical ways of incorporating those views into one's program. Ultimately, though, the point is not for youth workers to settle for one view over the others but to discover ways of incorporating tenets from each of the five views into their own ministries as they are applicable.

DeVries, Mark. *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do About It*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008. [Minister/Leadership] *Sustainable Youth Ministry* was one of the most helpful books when I (Jeremy) first started in youth ministry. The book is written more to church leaders than to youth ministers and is about creating a ministry team instead of placing the sustainability of the program solely on the shoulders of one "Rockstar" youth minister. Some of the information is a little dated (specifically, salaries); however, DeVries' approach to events and event planning is still among the best.

DeVries, Mark, and Nate Stratman. *Building Your Volunteer Team: A 30-Day Change Project for Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. [Minister] One of the most challenging aspects of youth ministry is the continual pressure to be the person who does everything in the ministry. Recruiting and training a volunteer team often seems like an overwhelming and unattainable task. DeVries and Stratman, however, offer a step-by-step "recipe" that helps youth ministers identify and recruit qualified individuals. The book is filled with everything a youth minister could need to develop a strong volunteer base. The authors even offer draft emails that can

be tailored to one's specific context. Youth ministers who have engaged in this process have found it to have enduring value.

Fraze, David. *Practical Wisdom for Youth Ministry: The Not-So-Simple Truths That Matter*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2018. [Minister] *Practical Wisdom* is a great resource for new youth ministers just entering the field of ministry. David Frazee has spent over 30 years in youth ministry as a youth worker and a professor of youth ministry. In this book, he discusses many of the often-overlooked sides of youth ministry programming that can end up playing a significant role in the success of a ministry and the longevity of the youth minister. He discusses everything from budgets to office hours; from conflict management to safety concerns; from mission trips to volunteerism. The book itself is easy to read and each chapter is filled with thought-provoking questions and practical suggestions that help new youth ministers start their ministry careers on the right trajectory.

Oestreicher, Mark. *Youth Ministry 3.0: A Manifesto of Where We've Been, Where We Are, and Where We Are Going*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008. [Scholar/Minister] Oestreicher's book offers a brief description of youth ministry's transition over the past several decades. It is a helpful resource for new youth ministers because it introduces a number of key elements in youth ministry thinking in a concise, easy-to-read format. Of particular importance are his discussions of contextualization in youth ministry, the importance of experiencing God, and the three tasks of adolescence: Identity, Autonomy, and Affinity. Though some of Oestreicher's description of youth culture is dated (applying more to Millennials than to Generation Z), his work still offers a picture of what youth ministry should be that makes this book rise to the top of the list.

Powell, Kara, and Chap Clark. *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. [Minister/Parent] *Sticky Faith* is the culmination of a research project funded by the Lilly Endowment entitled The College Transition Project. The project was conducted by Fuller Theological Seminary and took six years to complete. The researchers interviewed 500 youth group graduates during their first three years in college to determine five characteristics of youth group programs that create a thriving faith after high school. The book is written to both ministers and parents

alike. It offers practical advice on what families should do while their kids are in high school to help them develop a faith that will thrive in college.

Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin. *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016. [Minister/Parent/Leadership] *Growing Young* is one of the best books on ministry to young people out today. The book is the culmination of an extensive research project funded by the Lilly Endowment where the authors interviewed churches that were successfully reaching young people. They determined six key factors that are essential in helping young people engage in church: Unlock keychain leadership, empathizing with today's young people, take Jesus' message seriously, fuel a warm community, prioritize young people (and families) everywhere, and be the best neighbors. The book is intended to be read and discussed among the church leadership and offers reflective questions and thoughtful suggestions to help church leaders make the adjustments needed to reach today's youth.

Scandrette, Mark. *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*. Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011. [Minister/Leadership] Even though Scandrette's book is not intentionally a youth ministry book, his work offers an approach to faith formation that can easily be adapted for youth ministry. The basic premise of his book is communal experimentation in a set of practices inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, or "the Jesus Dojo," as he calls it. Traditional youth ministry tends to be a type of hands-off, lecture-style learning where students are fed information over topics of faith and discipleship. Scandrette highlights the importance of a hands-on approach to faith formation. Communal experimentation opens the door, especially for students, to try out new and exciting practices in a safe, nonthreatening environment. The book itself is easy to read with plenty of suggestions on how one would go about implementing the Jesus Dojo in their own context.

Work, Mike, and Ginny Olson. *Youth Ministry Management Tools 2.0.: Everything You Need to Successfully Manage Your Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. [Minister] Work and Olson provide an extensive resource on the basic duties of a youth minister. The work

is entirely focused on how to accomplish the day-to-day tasks of youth ministry. They offer practical suggestions on how to host successful staff meetings, develop calendars, offer thoughtful communication, managing finances, and much more. Some of the information regarding technology is a bit dated but the work is a great resource for new and experienced ministers looking to develop their administration skills.

### Youth Ministry Scholarship

The last twenty years have seen a significant shift in youth ministry scholarship. Research projects identifying the tremendous dropout rate of high school graduates from the church have motivated youth ministry scholarship to think more theologically about the practice of youth ministry. In youth ministry academics this has resulted in a shift away from the training of youth ministers as program directors towards developing youth ministers as practical theologians. This shift has been classified as “the theological turn in youth ministry.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the role of the social sciences in youth ministry scholarship has been widely debated, ushering in a fresh perspective on youth culture, adolescent development, and technological research. Since those topics were examined earlier in this article, this section will focus primarily on works of practical theology in youth ministry; however, it might be helpful to note that currently there is a small debate in youth ministry scholarship as to whether youth ministers should be primarily trained as theologians or trained in the social sciences as counselors and cultural anthropologist.

Dean, Kenda. *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. [Scholar/Minister] Dean takes an extensive look at youth culture and determines that adolescence is especially characterized by passion. She outlines how the passion of youth can only truly be answered through theology by placing young people in conversation with the passion of Christ. She develops a framework for youth ministry that guides the church not only in ways of developing and nurturing faithful passion but also, examines how the passion of youth can contribute to the overall health and faithfulness of the church. Though the description of youth culture is a bit dated (being more about Millennials than

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011).

iGens), her overall framework and concept are still relevant for the church today.

Dean, Kenda, and Christy Lang Hearlson, eds. *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education - If We Let It*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. [Scholar/Minister] This book is the result of years of research that came out of the first round of Lilly Endowment funded Youth Theology Institutes. This first round of gifts was distributed to 46 seminaries throughout the United States that were tasked with creating high school-aged theology institutes. Nearly all the chapters of this book were written by people who literally designed, created, and/or led one of these institutes. While all of the programs shared a basic, fundamental purpose, they range in “theological emphases, pedagogical dynamics, and organizational structures.” At their foundation, these institutes are about vocational discernment: that they might encourage students to pursue the ministry as a vocational option and theologically form future church leaders. The collective experiences and wisdom in this book, taken from years of on-the-ground work with teenagers, is truly a gift to the church.

Dean, Kenda, and Andrew Root. *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011. [Scholar] Dean and Root examine the practical theological shift that has occurred in youth ministry over the past twenty years. It critiques models of youth ministry that neglect theological reflection to jump straight to thoughtless activism. They examine the crisis of reality facing youth to show how only a praxis rooted in theology can truly address the needs of students today. *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* is one of the best books on practical theology in youth ministry and is required reading for the academic training of youth ministers in higher education.

Senter, Mark. *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. [Scholar] Senter offers one of the only books on the history of youth ministry in America. He takes a detailed look at the rich heritage of both youth ministry practice and scholarship starting back as early as the 1800s. Senter does not create his outline for youth ministry around the style or approach of youth ministry practice in churches but instead, he creates his outline by following cultural trends in youth ministry as

well as the inception and decline of different youth organizations over the years. His book is a helpful tool for understanding the arduous landscape youth ministry traversed while also highlighting historic pitfalls that should be avoided in youth ministry today.

### **What are the Ten Essential Books for Youth Ministry?**

Clark, Chap. *Hurt 2.0*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

Clark, Chap. Ed. *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.

Dean, Kenda Creasy, and Andrew Root. *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011.

Oestreicher, Mark. *Youth Ministry 3.0*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

O'Keefe, Theresa. *Navigating toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents*. New York: Paulist Press, 2018.

Powell, Kara, and Chap Clark. *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin. *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016.

Root, Andrew. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. Downers grove: IVP Books, 2007.

Root, Andrew. *The End of Youth Ministry: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It*. Baker Academic, 2020

Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford Press, 2009.

**Jeremy Smith** (DMin, Abilene Christian University) has served as the co-youth and family minister at Sunset Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas since 2012. He has almost 15 years of experience in student ministry programs (children's, youth, and college ministry). Dr. Smith is also a youth minister representative on the leadership team of Vocati, a Youth Theology Institute for Lubbock Christian University funded by the Lilly Endowment that is seeking creative ways to help high school students develop faith through theological orientation, creativity, and embodiment as well as helping youth develop a mission practice. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Abilene Christian University and a Masters of Biblical Studies from Lubbock Christian University. His thesis project was titled "Adolescent Spiritual Formation: Practical Theology as Filter for Youth Ministry." Dr. Smith lives in Lubbock, Texas with his wife Leah Smith.

**Steven Bonner** (DMin, Fuller Theological Seminary) serves as the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Bible, Undergraduate Department Chair, and Associate Professor of Christian Ministry. He attended Lipscomb University where he received his BA, MA, and MDiv. He received his DMin in Youth, Family, & Culture from Fuller Theological Seminary. He recently completed an MA in Conflict Management. His research focuses on adolescent psychosocial development, adolescent moral development, and the commodification of adolescence in youth sports; this research has been presented internationally. In 2015, Steven received a grant from the Lilly Endowment to create Vocati, a Youth Theology Institute, which he directed until 2018. Additionally, he served as the president of the national Association of Youth Ministry Educators, and has published "Understanding the Changing Adolescent" in *Adoptive Youth Ministry* and "Understanding Childhood Spirituality" in *Along the Way*. Steve and his wife, Amy, live in Franklin, Tennessee with their three children.

**Walter Surdacki** (DMin, Fuller Theological Seminary) serves as Associate Professor of Youth Ministry at Lipscomb University. He attended the Institute for Christian Students where he received his BS in Biblical Studies. He then attended Pepperdine University and earned his MS in Ministry. Following that he attended Fuller Theological Seminary where he earned his MDiv and his DMin in Youth, Family, & Culture. He served in full-time youth ministry at churches in Torrance, Malibu, and Campbell, California before coming to Lipscomb University to train the next generation of youth ministers. His research mainly focuses on the intersection of technology and theology and helps parents navigate the different pitfalls technology presents through the adolescent years by conducting training at churches, ministries, and schools internationally. Dr. Surdacki lives in Franklin, Tennessee with his wife Amy where he also serves as an elder at the Otter Creek Church. They have two adult-aged daughters.