

Closing The Ministry Gap:
Reimagining Pastoral Ministry with The First Third of Life

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The values of a society are often expressed in its architecture. For instance, All Saints Lutheran Church is a church very typical midwestern church building. It has an ornate sanctuary, offices, fellowship hall, and even a preschool. All the spaces are bright and open –except one. There was a realm in the building where the sun never touched. It was a dump for tattered furniture and a dungeon for wild things. This forsaken place was the youth room.

Adolescents have been segregated from the rest of the church body, relegated to a waiting room of moral formation and church programs. Why? As the notion of adolescence has evolved in Western Europe and North America, the identity of the parish pastor changed along with it. The construction of adolescence accelerated in the 19th and 20th centuries as the concept of the teen emerged, coinciding with the development of the Moralizing Pastor and later the Executive Pastor.¹ These two pastoral identities have followed American social trends in the 19th and 20th centuries by separating adolescents from adults in church life. As American society shifts away from modernity and adolescents continue to have little stake in the life of the church, I believe a new pastoral identity is needed: the *discipling pastor*. Based on Eugene Peterson’s *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, I believe pastoral identity needs to be formed around comprehensive faith formation for all ages, working to close the ministry gap by incorporating adolescents as valued parts of the gathered body of Christ. To imagine this pastoral identity taking shape, I suggest several beginning steps that pastors can take to close the ministry gap based on the five stones.

The Evolution of Adolescence and The Formation of The Modern Pastor

Adolescents

¹ Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013). 33; 39.

The medieval time period that contributed to modern pastoral identities did little to contribute to today's adolescent and teen identities. Children are rarely portrayed in medieval art, and in those rare occasions they look like scaled-down adults. They dress the same way as adults and have adult proportions, indicating that children were not considered all that different from adults.² Peasant children worked alongside peasant adults. There was no vocational division among them based on age.

It was not until the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation that young people begin to develop as a special category. Art portrayed children as people with soft features in the company of adults.³ The theologian Martin Luther had a hand in shaping the emerging modern understanding of adolescence. In the Large Catechism, Luther wrote that not only were young people to be instructed in the faith daily, but also receive education if possible.⁴ Luther did not stop here: he taught that children are to be protected from abuse.⁵ Children were becoming something to be cherished.

Adolescence was not distinct until the American colonial period. As the European middle class evolved in the centuries following Luther, childhood denoted a state of dependence, not an adult until the child could economically support himself.⁶ There was no difference between child and adolescent. However, as Europeans settled in North America and became a distinct society, a middle class evolved along with an educational system to teach job skills and provide cheap labor.⁷

² Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1962). 33.

³ *Ibid.* 37-38.

⁴ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000). 383.4; 350.19.

⁵ *Ibid.* 409.170.

⁶ Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. 26.

⁷ Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1977). 145.

The middle class practice of apprenticeship changed as industrialization and mechanization grew and radically changed the economy during the 19th century. Machines left only dead-end jobs for middle class adolescents. It was no longer wise to let adolescents enter the work world early in their lives. As a result, the middle class extended adolescence through education. Young people were increasingly required to attend school to better them as people, but to also keep them out of the labor force.

As educators, clergy, and parents perceived sincere threats toward young people from industrialization, schools moved to become more attractive, imitating the modern university by adding athletics and extra-curricular activities. Author Thomas Hine claims that adolescents had more power to create an identity as individuals and as a subset of society; in short, “Without high school, there are no teenagers.”⁸ A brand of sorts was developed around the high school, forming a youth society in schools that was distinct from both childhood and adulthood.

As high schools grew and became an established form in the early 20th century, the adolescent became a fully constructed and accepted institutional category in society. It was during this time when educational theorist G. Stanley Hall worried that adolescents were precocious in all the wrong ways.⁹ While the world was still a dangerous place for youth, youth were themselves dangerous. They were all hormone-driven and problematic, needing to be restrained and shaped by adults. Originally a middle class invention, Hall and others moved adolescence out from the middle class to something considered universal and biological. Rural, urban, rich, and poor were all considered hormone-frenzied.

⁸ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York, NY: Perennial, 1999). 139.

⁹ *Ibid.* 158.

American adolescents in the 20th century found themselves in a rather interesting position: they were kept with only their peers, regularly kept out of substantive jobs, and kept in school. They also regularly found themselves with expendable income (whether their own or a parent's). As a result, they found themselves living in the teen age. Nothing did more to solidify this more than post-war America. The abundant economy catered to teenage conformity with television shows such as *American Bandstand*.¹⁰ An increasing number of older teens were attending college.¹¹ Teens were now their own culture, separate from adults.

Pastors

As adolescence was formed by the forces of Western society over the past several centuries, so too was the Western Christian concept of the pastor. Using economist Jeremy Rifkin's concept of energy regime transitions,¹² Andrew Root divides the pastoral office into four different movements. The first two are *cosmic storyteller* and *rise of the priest*.¹³ In hunter-gatherer societies, the cosmic storytellers' role was to describe and interpret the world in which people lived. They told of how their people's god brought good to them and bad to their rivals. As agriculture spurred the rise of the priest, the role shifted from being a storyteller to someone authorized to protect the stories.¹⁴ This was someone who could read and interpret the sacred texts. The priest was also someone who regulated the religious economy, managing the laity's life passages and declaring things holy or unholy.

¹⁰ Ibid. 246-247.

¹¹ Ibid. 257.

¹² Energy regime transition is a pivotal moment in society when the society encounters a paradigm shift as its source of energy needed for living changes. See: Root, *The Relational Pastor*. 25.

¹³ Ibid. 27-28.

¹⁴ Ibid. 29.

Both the roles of cosmic storyteller and priest are still active to a certain extent in Western society. However, our concern is more focused on later developments: *moral agent* and *program manager*. As the Western world moved away from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy, the world became compartmentalized and matters of faith became individualized. Identity was based more on intellectual ascent and not familial descent or religion.¹⁵ Faith was still important in American society, but its depth was kept to individuals and the faith groups to which those individuals belonged. America bore a generic, shallow “Christian” culture, which supported the values of the nation.¹⁶ The role of the pastor during this time was one of moral agent. The pastor served as an exemplar of morality. Whether he was liberal or conservative, the pastor was working to improve individuals and society. The faith stories were used to change behavior.

The role of pastor took on an additional identity as the Western world transitioned to using oil and electricity. Corporate culture and consumerism evolved and became the dominant forces in American society. The pastor was now the *Executive Pastor*.¹⁷ People as individuals started behaving like corporations, looking always to improve themselves. The church and the pastor’s work followed this, making intervention programming the focus of ministry.¹⁸ The church was now in business, offering to hungry consumers youth groups, softball teams, praise bands, and guidance on how to live your best life.

¹⁵ Ibid. 33.

¹⁶ Ibid. 35.

¹⁷ Ibid. 39.

¹⁸ Ibid. 38.

According to Root, the Executive Pastor provided a service—“an entertaining, pseudo-therapeutic connection with the entrepreneurial pastor.”¹⁹ The church is now just one voice in a crowded marketplace of ideas and the pastor finds herself needing to make her ideas into the most appealing brand.

Youth Ministry Specialization and The Divorce Between Pastor and Adolescents

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have left the American church (as well as the rest of society) in a difficult predicament: we are on the verge of another paradigm shift. Root cites this as “shared energy.”²⁰ Society is slowly moving away from hierarchical ways of sharing to what looks like a more distributive form. Because of this coming change, the current way of being a teen or being a pastor is giving way to something different.

As an institution comprised of humans, the church is prone to follow societal trends over the ages. The church’s leadership came to be shaped by corporate polity in the latter half of the 20th century, prone to seek out experts for specific problems. Churches determined they needed a person in tune with both Jesus and seemingly distant teens after enduring, “The Beatles. The pill. The draft. Eve of Destruction? Ball of Confusion!”²¹ They needed a youth director.

What the invention of the youth director and other specialized children’s ministers did in churches was update the secular school structure that was already at work in the church as Sunday school.²² The young people now had their own “pastor” who knew them and was able to relate to them—at least, that was the goal. The idea behind youth

¹⁹ Ibid. 39.

²⁰ Ibid. 42.

²¹ Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. 250.

²² Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present*. 207

ministry is that it would work with a *distinctly separate* group in the church. This confirmed what already was in existence in the rest of American society: the church's teens belonged to a separate culture from the adults of the church.

There are two follies the church has fallen into as a result of the ecclesial separation between adolescents and adults: they either matter too much or not enough. Following the teenage dichotomy developed over the 19th and 20th centuries, the church sees that the world is dangerous and threatening to adolescents, who will be the church's future. The other view is that adolescents are immature and hormone-driven, needing Christian piety to tame them. Both these models have sent church leaders scrambling to find ways to keep adolescents from leaving the church. The youth director ideally would have all the answers, sparing the congregation from making any difficult changes in its practices.

As a result of specialized youth ministry, the pastor's work by default is in the realm of adults. It is hardly the case that most pastors do not want to associate with young people. Rather, the new corporate practices in the church have made the pastor superfluous youth ministry, since the pastor is not the teen expert. Their primary interest is shifted to oversee the youth ministers, insuring they are meeting the church's goals of either keeping in or drawing in young people. They manage the specialists in order that the church's programming is as appealing and efficient as possible.

Such hands-off youth ministry was not always the practice. Back in the 19th century, clergy took up an interest in Sunday school as moral expectations of the program arose. The laity were squeezed out as Sunday school stopped being about outreach and

became a way to propagate new generations of members.²³ By providing moral formation, pastors could insure society stayed largely Christian and the pastors' bank accounts could stay in the black.

What has changed from the 19th century is that the church depends on consumerism to maintain membership. The Executive Pastor has to manage a series of programs and develop new ones in order to keep people interested in the church. The unfortunate part of this is that it leaves the pastor tied to marketing, rather than mission and ministry. Youth ministry is a brand the Executive Pastor manages, but its current form leaves adolescents on the outside. At the end of the 20th century, a mutual alienation set in between teen and adult societies.²⁴ This rift is reflected in youth ministry, in that the program is the only place in the church where adolescents belong. Within the Lutheran and other mainline traditions, people are considered full church members after they have participated in the rite of confirmation, which most often happens during adolescence. Confirmed members are theoretically able to vote and sit on church councils. In practice, this is simply not the case. The church's activities are structured with adults in mind, leaving no space for adolescents outside of youth ministry. With no space outside of youth ministry for adolescents, it is not a surprise young people are not apt to stay involved in the church. They have no strong connection to anything outside the space created solely for them.

The Executive Pastor bears some responsibility for this disconnect with adolescents when her interactions are limited to only necessary pastoral acts, such as teaching confirmation. Having a youth specialist diverts the pastor's attention elsewhere.

²³ Ibid. 117.

²⁴ Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. 275.

The pastor's motivation for teaching confirmation is two-fold. First, going back to the Moralizing Pastor, he still has an interest in developing the moral character of young people. Adolescents still sit on the brink of destruction. The second reason is that confirmation builds the denominational brand. The Executive Pastor wants more Lutherans (or Catholics, Methodists, etc.). She uses the traditional rite hoping it might keep adolescents involved in congregational life, thereby sustaining membership. The problem comes when the new "full members" do not stay involved.

The pastor's limited role in the lives of young people has dire implications. Aside from confirmation, baptism, and possibly children's sermons, the pastor's involvement with young people is very limited. When this limited involvement is compounded by the use of the specialist youth minister, young people learn that only adults matter to the pastor. Second, the pastor's role in confirmation teaches young people that faith is about intellectual ascent. Within the Lutheran tradition, adolescents are taught the basics of Lutheran theology and practice and—in one way or another—tested over it. After "passing" the test, they participate in a ceremony eerily similar to a school graduation. Having the pastor show up only for the schooling of young people teaches them that faith is an academic event, affecting little else in their lives. Young people "graduate" from church after being confirmed.²⁵ Faith becomes an achievement rather than a way of life. This is an accidental curriculum taught to young people, but it is nonetheless true.

Moving Toward The Discipling Pastor

In his work on pastoral ministry, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, Eugene Peterson writes about the formation of the Executive Pastor: "The pulpit is grounded in

²⁵ Nancy Going, "What Are We Doing— on Maturing Christian Young People" (Multimedia Presentation, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN).

the prophetic and kerygmatic traditions but the church office is organized around IBM machines.”²⁶ Pastors, over multiple generations, have become prone to follow the late modern disconnections in society. All too often, what happens in the pulpit has little if any bearing on the rest of the week. As society moves to a new energy regime, the pastoral office must be rebuilt for a church that embodies its faith, while especially keeping in mind the social separation of young people and adults. Peterson believes pastors become a parody of themselves when they lose their Biblical roots. He proposes five Biblical aspects of pastoral identity: prayer, story-making, lament, nay-saying, and community building. These five aspects connect to the current spiritual needs of the church and its adolescents.

Prayer

It seems obvious that a pastor should pray and teach others to do likewise. As faith has become disconnected from the rest of people’s lives, many have forgotten how to pray and the reasons for praying. The default practice today is usually to pray for self fulfillment:

*God, help me find a parking spot.
 God, where are my keys?
 Oh, Lord, show me where to invest my money.
 God, give me a date to the prom.*

These are exaggerations, of course, but they speak the truth. They use prayer as a way to get stuff and to get ahead, not as a way to maintain a relationship.

Peterson argues this exact point; prayer is an act of intimacy with God. It maintains the health of the relationship of humanity with the divine.²⁷ For Christians, prayer starts not with themselves, but with Christ. Christ comes first to bring people into

²⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980). 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 29.

communion with God, like one who longs for his beloved; people respond to this in prayer. Peterson connects imagery from *The Song of Songs* to prayer.²⁸ The relationship between the lover and the beloved is one full of passion, longing, and even frustration. Just asking God for favors assumes there is no real relationship. However, Christ enters into the stark realities people face. Pain, frustration, and joy can be shared with God through Christ.

Pastors must be ready to engage this intimacy with God and show others, including adolescents, how to live into this intense relationship. To counter the errant roles of Moralizing and Executive Pastor, pastors must bring God to where people think God cannot go. By praying daily with and for all people inside and outside the church, pastors will show them how to wrestle with God, how to pursue God, and how to be pursued by God. Prayer gives space in the lives of people for God's work to be known.

Story-Making

While—according to Root's interpretation of Rifkin—Western society is moving toward a shift in pastoral ministry, pastors still bear the old roles of storyteller and protector of the story.²⁹ Peterson advocates a way to manifest these old roles: story making. To describe this, he uses the book of Ruth, where God acts in the lives of very ordinary people.³⁰ Just as Ruth's story becomes connected to God's story, our lives can become significant in context with God's actions—"our lives are therefore consequential."³¹ Pastors are to point to God at work in the life of the church, including adolescents.

²⁸ Ibid. 28.

²⁹ Root, *The Relational Pastor*. 29.

³⁰ Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. 70.

³¹ Ibid. 68.

Executive Pastors are prone to temptations of moralism and condescension, Peterson notes, and these temptations arise from the role of pastor-as-manager, even in story-telling, where the pastor digests the text into a ready-made product for adolescents to consume.³² When they use a misfit as a moral caution, they take the misfit out of history, where God works. Condescension works similarly, in that pastors can reduce people's lives down to simple formulas, alienating them again from history.³³ Pastors can curtail the separation between adolescents and the greater congregation by giving space for the stories of adolescents. They are young, but they still have stories to tell; accounts of anguish, triumph, despair, and hope. In giving space to their stories, adults can hear their stories and connect them to their own. Pastors then must take this a step further and connect God's story to the people's stories. Salvation happens in our boring, average histories.

Lamenting

"The suffering is *there*, and where the sufferer is, God is."³⁴ Peterson poses this as the great lesson in the book of Lamentations. The writer grieves over the destruction of Jerusalem, but does not believe God has abandoned him (or her). Americans tend to equate suffering with God's abandonment. People seem to fear suffering, possibly believing divine abandonment is contagious. Pastors are again partially responsible for this bad theology, preferring to proclaim God's favor to the morally upright and create walls of programming to separate people (and God) from the suffering of others.

It is paramount that pastors help not only adults, but also adolescents in lamenting. People fear that if God does not prevent pain, then God may not exist. Lament

³² Ibid. 72.

³³ Ibid. 73.

³⁴ Ibid. 94.

is the opposite of all this: it directs people *toward* God, not *away* from God. “Judgment and mercy are not opposites, but complements.”³⁵ People can express their pain in God’s presence, knowing God has not abandoned them. Lament allows space for adolescent maturity; they can admit to having complex adult emotions. Also, leading people in lament shows that grief and suffering have a beginning and an end. Peterson notes that the Lamentations always hearken back to times when God saved God’s people from obliteration. For Christians, lament remembers both past faithfulness and *future faithfulness*. In the coming resurrection, Christ will make salvation complete.

Nay-saying

This is not the grouchy disposition for which some readers might hope. Rather, pastoral nay-saying is about naming things as they are, rather than trying to make them what others wish they were. Peterson writes:

Pastors are in the awkward position of refusing to give what a great many people assume it is our assigned job to give. We are in the embarrassing position of disappointing people in what they think they have a perfect right to get from us. We are asked to pray for an appropriate miracle; we are called upon to declare an authoritative answer. But our calling equips us for neither. In fact, it forbids us to engage in either the miracle business or the answer business.³⁶

Coinciding with this debunking, pastors must also be yea-sayers, continuously echoing the “yes” that comes to people in Christ.³⁷ They must pronounce that God has already said, “yes,” despite people wanting to say “no” to God. Nay-saying fights the temptation to provide the “right” answers as the Moralizing Pastor. It counters the need to “treat” the problems of others through programming as the Executive Pastor.

³⁵ Ibid. 96.

³⁶ Ibid. 123.

³⁷ Ibid. 127.

Saying “no” is particularly important in the lives of adolescents because it is a different type of “no” than they normally hear. It is common for teens to hear “no” when they ask for more responsibility or freedom. Pastors are instead to say “no” to dismissing young people with formulaic answers and dried up wisdom. They are to affirm God’s claim on adolescents and affirm adolescents’ walk of faith. Saying “yes” to the lives of adolescents gives them validity in the life of the greater church.

Community Building

Peterson associates community building with the story of Esther. Esther and Mordecai hold to God’s promises while their people are spared genocide in Persia. God’s saving work was celebrated after the Jews were spared. The church forms as a group to celebrate God’s promises. Contrasting with voluntary groups in American society that people join, the church is instead called and gathered by God and formed around word and sacrament. It thrives on preaching and prayer and faith is nurtured through its fellowship. The life of the church depends on the habitual call and intervention of God in the lives of humanity; this is cause for celebration.

Pastoral work starts with a call to this celebration through worship.³⁸ Calling people to a worshipping community is not about offering people sound advice (moral pastor) nor is it about providing the best programs for self-betterment (Executive Pastor), but it is about receiving and living into God’s promises. Peterson argues the celebration in the Esther story works because of the relationship between God and God’s people.³⁹ For adolescents, there exists great pressure to join elite clubs and organizations. “Community” can become a means to an end for them as prospective Colleges demand

³⁸ Ibid. 165.

³⁹ Ibid. 177.

“community involvement.” Pastors can at least stop this madness in the church by forming worshipping communities that gather to celebrate, not to get ahead. For adolescents this means making the church into an actual community where they are connected to all ages.

Early Practices for The Discipling Pastor

Early in *Five Smooth Stones*, Peterson states that the stones are the foundation of pastoral ministry. When pastoral practice has been knocked down, the stones have been picked up and built into a new building.⁴⁰ Pastors are now at a pivotal moment in church history when the stones are tumbling down as American society is shifting toward the shared energy regime, making the time ripe to move beyond the Moralizing Pastor and Executive Pastor. It is time to form the Discipling Pastor. Hine notes that adolescents want a stake in greater society; they are hungry for recognition and responsibility.⁴¹ For a healthier church and pastoral ministry, adolescents must be integrated into the whole life of the church. The following plan offers technical applications to spur along adaptive change toward discipleship-based pastoral ministry in congregational life.

There is one matter that must be clarified. It is easy to infer that I believe specialized youth ministers are superfluous. On the contrary, youth ministers and other specialized ministry staff can be quite beneficial to a congregation’s mission and ministry. Youth ministers, however, should not be called to a congregation on the premise (spoken or unspoken) that they are to manage and moralize a congregation’s youth all while finding ways to keep them interested in church. Pastors, as figureheads of

⁴⁰ Ibid. 18.

⁴¹ Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. 297.

congregations, can set the agenda for congregational practices. If pastors step into the world of the church youth (outside of confirmation), they teach the rest of the congregation to do likewise.

Application 1: praying everywhere

Pastors have much to model for their parishioners, and prayer might be the most important. Pastors' prayer lives can serve as a model. The first thing the discipling pastor shall do is pray regularly outside of Sunday worship. This personal prayer does not need to be heavily advertised, but the pastors' need to honor their relationship with God if they expect parishioners to do likewise. Outside of personal prayer practices, pastors must incorporate the congregation's and the world's life into corporate prayer. In Lutheran and other traditions of worship, pastors or assisting ministers often will lead the congregation in praying the prayers of the people. Before or during this time, the pastor shall invite parishioners to share their concerns and joys, and then bring them before God in prayer. Such a practice would open the concerns of adolescents to the prayers of the whole congregation. Adolescents are even invited to lead the prayers of the people.

Pastors shall pray and call others to regularly pray in mundane moments in the church's life, both inside and outside of parish life. Pray for discernment in managing the budget while at finance team meetings. Give thanks to God for no injuries after decorating the sanctuary for Advent and Christmas. Cry out to God as SAT tests press down upon high school students. Like the prayers of the people, invite adolescents to lead these prayers if they are comfortable doing so. Everyday prayer does not need to be overly formal or ritualistic, just relevant to the lives of God's people.

The discipling pastor needs to move prayer outside the building. People can take prayer into coffee shops, bowling alleys, and parking lots. A practice already well established that can help with this is prayer walking, where a person prays for what they encounter while out on a walk. In modeling this for both adults and adolescents, it shows that God is at work in the routine, that God cannot be limited to church buildings. Try inviting parishioners of all ages out on a prayer walk.

Pastors shall invite congregants to pray for one another throughout the week and teach them how. Have adult mentors to pray for adolescents. Have adolescents pray for each other before leaving for school each day. Of all these prayer practices, praying for each other will likely make the biggest impact in dissolving the wall between adolescent and adult.

Application 2: Connecting God's Story to The Adolescent Story

I, like many pastors, thrive on sermon illustrations. When pastors draw from the seemingly unimportant lives of adolescents, it puts the history of salvation into their lives. For example, pastors could, in exegeting the story of Jonah, connect the unwillingness of Jonah to travel to Nineveh to an adolescent's frustration in college planning. The adolescent could not afford her dream school, but she won several scholarships from another school. She thought she would hate the school, but it ended up being a blessing in her life. Keep in mind, that is not perfect exegesis, but it is a place to start. When adolescents see God's story connects to theirs, the church looks more like a place where they belong.

Beyond preaching, story making needs to happen among the congregation. Learning God's story is catechesis that never ends. The discipling pastor can facilitate

story-making by forming intergenerational Bible study groups solely around this notion. During “Story Time,” adults and adolescents would first read scripture together, sharing what seems important and any questions they have. Then participants would share relevant stories with one another, looking for where God is at present in them and where God is calling them. Any lingering questions about life, the universe, and everything are also welcomed to Story Time.

Application 3. Highs, but also Lows

“Highs and Lows” is a common youth ministry practice when youth to share joys and struggles. People know what to do with highs, but not with lows. In mentioning the low, it gives the grief a place to be. It does not need to be exaggerated or suppressed, but it needs to be named. The discipling pastor shall include into the previously mentioned Story Time space share their highs and lows. In sharing the lows, pastors can show the group how to listen reflectively to one another and then remind them of God’s promise in Christ, even when that promise seems far away.

Furthermore, pastors can make lament a part of Sunday worship. It can be part of the prayers of the people, or it can be part of something else. Instead of singing the kyrie, which is used in most mainline liturgies, parishioners could be invited forward to express grief over something that has happened recently, after which pastors would bring words to remind them of God’s past faithfulness and future promise in Christ. All ages would be invited into this. Pastors would have to be mindful of the health of the congregation; a practice like this can leave people vulnerable.

Application 4. The Nay-Saying Pulpit and The Yea-Saying Presence

The most common place to hear sound answers and moralisms is in the pulpit. Pastors simply need to stop this. As part of new pastoral practice, nay-saying starts in the pulpit. The discipling pastor shall stop giving easy answers in sermons. End the practice of giving advice to the pious. Do the opposite: invite people into struggle; teach parishioners that the godly life is more about discipleship than personal piety. Questions are to be invited, contemplated, and prayed, rather than expunged with an easy answer.

The discipling pastor seeks to say “yes” to Christ at work in the world, showing the intrinsic value in all people because of Christ’s “yes.” The discipling pastor shall push this “yes” by seeking and welcoming for the social “other,” who sits on the edge of society. Pastors can lead this by coming alongside oppressed groups and advocating for equality.

One place to start yea-saying in the lives of adolescents is to visit with them and their families outside of church events. By occasionally going to a students debate tournaments, musicals, basketball games, or art shows, it points back to the “yes” Christ says to humanity.

Application 5: Community Worship, Community Practice

The great part of worship is that, usually, all ages are present. It seems strange to keep the business of leading worship only in the realm of adults. In mainline churches, adolescents are often delegated the role of acolyting, where they light candles, assist with communion, and a few other functions. What is there preventing young people from participating in other roles? Adolescents can be invited to lead in song, read scripture, and help plan worship. Please note, this is beyond the token “Youth Sunday,” which tends to reinforce the adolescent-adult separation in the congregation.

Finally, pastors need to radically change the practice of confirmation. Confirmation can instead become a new stage in lifelong discipleship. Instead of creating a curriculum that lasts three years, the practice of confirmation should be open-ended. It could start as adolescents began participating in Story Time, but continue as they grew into adults. Instead of a “graduation” ritual, pastors could mark rites of passage in adolescents’ lives, including a “sending” for when young people leave home.

I would love to massively renovate All Saints Lutheran. If I had an unlimited budget, I would tack on a new wing that surrounded the church building that the congregation could use for both educating adults and young people. However, taking on such a project would require a huge shift in thinking for both pastors and the church. Remember, though, that the ministry gap formed over centuries of change, and closing the ministry gap will require faithfulness to God’s promises and consistent practice of the Discipling Pastor. To continue to bear witness to Christ, pastoral identity needs to shift as Western society is moving into a new energy regime. Pastors need to move away from moralizing and managing programs but must move toward discipling. In this way, All Saints Lutheran and other churches like it can open and brighten the church building and life for adolescents—and indeed—all age groups, empowering parishioners for lifelong relationships with God and with each other.

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