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**Meeting Report:**

**Youth Ministry Practitioners**  
*on the*  
**Religious and Spiritual Practices**  
**of American Youth**

**December 8, 2000**  
**University of North Carolina**  
**Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

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## Background/Introduction

On Friday, December 8, 2000, a group of youth ministry professors and practitioners from a range of denominations and geographical regions met in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to discuss a research project on the religious and spiritual practices of American youth. The meeting was part of a Lilly Endowment planning grant received by Dr. Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to explore the need for and feasibility and possible direction of such a research project.

Participants included **Dean Borgman**, Professor of Youth Ministries and Director of the Center for Youth Studies at Gordon Cromwell Theological Seminary in Boston; **Kenda Creasy Dean**, Assistant Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture and Director of the School of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary; **Roland Martinson**, Professor of Youth, Young Adult, and Family Ministry at Lutheran Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota; **Bob McCarty**, Executive Director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in Washington, D.C.; and **Evelyn Parker**, Assistant Professor of Christian Education at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. Also present at the meeting were members of the UNC team exploring this research topic: Christian Smith, Mark Regnerus, and doctoral students Kraig Beyerlein, Mark Constantine, Melinda Lundquist Denton, and Heather Kane O'Donovan.

Prior to the youth ministry meeting, the UNC team had interviewed scholars about potential research questions and appropriate methodology for the study; convened a public advisory board of leaders

from philanthropy, media, and public policy; and performed a literature search on thousands of records relating to youth and religion.

The team's preliminary vision for the project combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, including a national survey that would gather information from parents and youth, and in-depth follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of the youth surveyed.

"We're aware that our team has certain strengths as sociologists," Smith explained to the practitioners, "but that we also have limits. We need feedback from other communities and people and organizations if this project is going to realize its full potential. The purpose of this consultation is to get input from you – thinkers and doers in the field of youth ministry – and to see how our work might learn from yours."

## Focusing Questions

Before launching into discussion, participants reviewed a list of questions the team had prepared to guide the conversation, including:

- In what ways might a research project on American youth, religion, and spirituality be helpful to youth ministry theorists and practitioners?
- Are there particular trends in youth ministry today that the team should be aware of as we design this project?
- How can the research project treat religion not as a generic property, but seriously take into account the particularities of different religious traditions?

- How can the research project explore the religious and spiritual *practices* of youth – not just their stated beliefs, but what they *do*, what practices they engage in?
- How can the research team take seriously differences in race, ethnicity, and social class of youth in our project design?
- In what ways might the findings of this project be structured and disseminated to be most helpful to people and organizations involved in youth ministry?
- What potential pitfalls can you foresee that we should try to avoid?

## Defining Terms: Youth, Spirituality, and Practices

One of the first tasks participants undertook was to clarify some of the central terms of the proposed research project. Commenting on the importance of this step, Roland Martinson noted: “Today, we’re reinventing most of the key indicators of what it means to be, become, and belong. People are redefining what it means to be a ‘family,’ who is a ‘child,’ and so on. Many terms and notions from the general culture are in flux. Reality and pop culture are out ahead of academia in terms of providing the major definitions of what it means to be, become, and belong.”

### “*Spirituality*”

The first term the group tackled was “spirituality.” “What do you mean when you say *spirituality*?” asked Evelyn Parker. “And how does that differ from religion?”

Smith acknowledged that the team was grappling with the distinction: “We’re aware that increasingly the differentiation is made, and that some people say that

spirituality as distinct from religion is especially important to youth. Typically, religion has more to do with traditional, historically received, institutional expressions of faith; whereas spirituality is more subjective, personal, or free-floating. We’d like to figure out what the distinction is *for youth*? Is it real? What is the difference? And how do the two relate?”

Drawing on her research experiences, Parker commented that how the team conceptualizes and uses “spirituality” and “religion” will be pivotal. “I studied youth in Chicago in 1994 and 1995 and asked about their beliefs,” she said. “The black youth couldn’t connect with the term ‘spirituality.’ That was a foreign concept. I believe none of the 20 teens I talked with understood how to talk about ‘spirituality.’”

Bob McCarty then offered an image he uses when working with youth to discuss the differences between religion and spirituality: “I think of spirituality as a first name, a personal relationship with God, the personal faith identity. The last name is the religious or denominational identity, the communal identity. Clearly, early on, children are not as conscious of their uniqueness and identity, so that last name of faith is more prevalent (‘I belong to this family; I’m part of that community of faith.’). Currently, I see an emphasis on what I would call vertical spirituality – me and God. It’s all first name, me and God and how I’m doing with God. It ignores the horizontal spirituality of me and my neighbor, me and the community. It’s got to be first name-last name; it’s got to be personal and communal identity if we’re going to be serious about justice and service.”

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Kenda Dean added that in another project her research team explicitly asked youth to define religion and spirituality. “The way it came out, and this was true internationally not just true of the American kids, was that religion is bad, spirituality is good. Spirituality was about personal experience, and religion was about institutions,” she said.

Participants agreed that the UNC team would make a valuable contribution to youth ministry if the project could help deepen understanding of how youth perceive religion and spirituality, as well as how the two terms relate to each other.

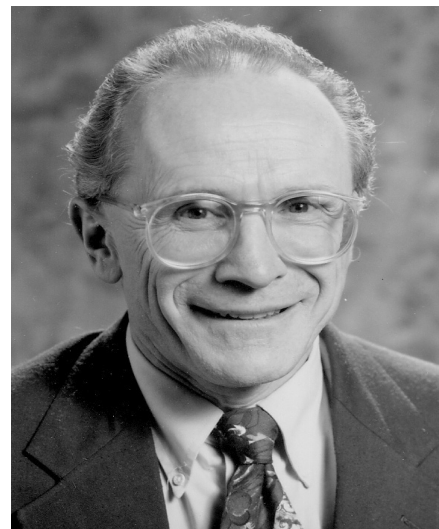
### ***“Youth”***

A lengthy discussion ensued about *who* would be included in this study on youth. Smith said the planning team was prepared to interview a national sample of youth, ages 12-18. The group cautioned that there is considerable debate over what constitutes “youth” in the world of youth ministry, and that the age range may be wider than what the planning team expected.

Speaking to this debate, Martinson explained: “In the last 40 years, the time period included in youth-ness or youth-dom has expanded. Today people look upon youth as beginning around ages 8, 9, or 10. At the same time, the range has moved upward in terms of chronological age. Some consider youth to be persons 28 or 30 years of age who fit certain characteristics. Faith communities have done well in building a bridge from childhood to adulthood in the early years of that period. But the part of the bridge that goes from the time people get wheels or head off to college is quite thoroughly destroyed or nonexistent. Huge numbers of people are no longer affiliated

with any kind of faith tradition between the ages of 16 and 30, especially males. Your results will be very different if you look at the practices and attitudes of the younger set, who possess a very different consciousness than the older set.”

Kenda Dean added that “internationally, youth are people under 30. Americans truncated youth to mean high school during the ‘50s and ‘60s in post-WWII times. Now you say ‘youth’ in a church and they think you mean 8- and 9-year-olds. The colloquial use of the term has overtaken the literature. I usually define youth – or adolescence – as the onset of puberty through the enduring vocational, ideological, and relational commitments of adulthood. We can figure out where it begins. We just don’t know where it ends.”



***Roland Martinson***

### ***“Practices”***

Smith explained that the UNC study proposes to look critically at the religious and spiritual “practices” of youth. The term “practices” was very important to the youth ministry representatives present, as they felt the team might learn as much or more from

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the practices or routines youth engage in as from verbal accounts of their beliefs and feelings about faith, religion, or spirituality.

“I have a hunch that religious practices transcend developmental stage,” posited Dean. “Practices aren’t things that we are told to do because we happen to be six. We do them because we happen to be part of a congregation – whether we’re six or sixty. So what is transcendent about practices? And how do our development and social location affect the way those practices look and the way they get played out?”

## Scanning the Youth Landscape

The discussion of practices led the youth ministry practitioners to sketch out some of the characteristics of youth they have come across in their own work and research. They described today’s youth in terms of two generations (20- to 30-year-olds and those under 20), each with certain faith characteristics. They described the opposing forces of individualism and the need for a communal identity that confront youth. They talked about the faith practices of youth in terms of music, dance, practical ministries, and response to tragedy. Finally, they discussed youths’ perceptions of hopelessness, heaven, and salvation.

### *Two Generations*

Martinson described two generations of youth that have emerged in current literature, and that have been shaped very differently in terms of faith practices. “They’re divided in a variety of ways,” he said, “Strauss and Howe, for example, say that we’re talking about a 13<sup>th</sup> Generation that was born sometime after the Boomers (1965 or 1968 up to 1980 or 1981). The persons who were born after 1980 are very

often referred to as Generation Xers or the Millennials.”

Many of those in the older group were baptized, or went through first communion. But faith was not a part of their everyday family or community existence. “And so it was gone,” he said. “Other practices emerged to deal with questions of death and hopelessness. Those practices were not drawn from the faith community or from faith stories. This group points to the band U2, *Joshua Tree*, second song. They say, ‘I was at a concert at this place when it happened.’ Their practices, their narratives, aren’t the narratives of the faith communities; they’re not the practices of family communal life. They’re the practices of a pop culture that has shaped their existence profoundly. On the other hand, members of the younger group have hardly been shaped at all by the faith tradition. They were never baptized, or if they were, they never entered the door of any kind of shaping program or catechetics. Harry Potter is their God story. And in their case, almost all the practices are the practices of individualism and technology.”

In addition to the cultural emphasis on individualism and the technological revolution, participants pointed to secularization – “the slippage of the practice of religion in America” – and the disintegration of family life as factors that have changed the way youth understand and look to religion and faith as part of their lives. In some cases, youth are turning to church or to spiritual practices after having experienced no history of religion or faith practice in their families or communities. For these youth, extreme individualism and isolation has driven them to search in experimental ways for community.



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“After the civil rights movement and desegregation, large numbers of African American Christians moved to northern urban settings,” Evelyn Parker noted. “Many decided not to go to church or were unable to find church communities. So now you have three generations hence, young people coming to church who don’t have the history or don’t have all that which parents and grandparents might have passed on to them.”

The youth who are turning to church, said Roland Martinson, “are not practicing religion the way other generations practiced religion. They’re practicing *faith*.” Such distinction becomes more obvious when youth are asked to discuss their faith practices. Participants said youth will talk openly about their beliefs and the ways in which they act out those beliefs. But when the conversation turns to church, they “shut down.” “Youth don’t believe church practices can fulfill their needs for community or a sense of belonging,” noted Borgman. “They seek community in gangs or peer groups, places that they can engage in practices that are meaningful to them.” Dean called these alternative practices a “direct line to an inchoate theology that’s sitting inside and needing a way to get out.”

### ***Musical Expressions of Faith and Spirituality***

Much of the conversation about the influences of popular culture on youth focused on musical expressions of faith. In focus groups and interviews, participants consistently have found that youth identify musical groups and songs as having a profound impact on their faith or spiritual development. Yet, the practitioners pointed out, the musical genres that youth find inspiring are as diverse as the youth

themselves. “There is no youth monoculture,” reminded Roland Martinson. Some youth find great fulfillment through Christian music and Christian rock concerts; others look to the lament songs of hip-hop and rap artists; and still others find meaning in pop music.

**Parker:** I met a young Baptist woman who was struggling with salvation and “being saved.” She was under a lot of parental pressure to become saved. She was in a lot of pain over that. But she went to a Christian concert with cousins, and she says: “It gave me hope.” In the context of the concert she felt energized, a sense of being able to go on. Even though this girl had been going to church every Sunday with her family and participating in the youth group and involved with liturgical dance, it was not in that context that she felt a sense of really flourishing and being whole. It was at the concert.

**Dean:** I teach junior high Sunday school at my church. The kids I work with don’t go to Christian concerts. I’m lucky if I can get them to listen to a Christian CD. We start every week with God sightings: Where did you see God this week? Where did you get blocked from God? That always takes us places – we feel some transcendent dimension breaking into the sleepy little room of 40 kids. They say things like, ‘I saw God at this concert,’ and it will be a secular concert, or in a Blink 182 song about suicide – hardly what you would call a Christian group. They don’t get this Christian concert stuff. They see God in pop culture. Somehow they sense that in this song about a band member’s friend’s suicide there’s a path to God, a moment of transcendence or hope.

Martinson cautioned that when describing and talking about youth, “we have to be very careful about generalizing” – not only about ethnicity, class, status, or region of the country, but also about groups or communities of youth.

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## ***Dance and Other Liturgical Expressions of Faith***

Martinson acknowledged that because television and computers are so compelling for today's youth, "the *great drama* of the church's liturgy is no longer great drama. It doesn't have nearly the compelling embodiment, engagement, and interactivity that is needed if liturgy as drama is going to return to us."



*Evelyn Parker*

Evelyn Parker described the current popularity and success of liturgical engagement forms such as liturgical dance and "praise teams" for teenagers in the Black church. "Historically, 'holy dancing' has been a part of the African American church. However, some bourgeoisie African American churches have forbidden it. Because of people like Kurt Franklin, Black churches are beginning to say, 'You can dance again.' Young people are drawn to church because they can bring their whole selves to the worship, not just stand there and sing and not move. They can dance. In Jamaica Queens, New York, it's not just a holy dance. They bring secular dance into the church, because kids are saying, 'If I shouldn't be in the nightclubs, where can I

do this?' The churches allow them to dance and stomp within the congregation."

Along with various types of involvement in the liturgy, participants said they have seen a trend toward youth trying to reclaim parts of worship or religious practice that have been left behind. Kenda Dean described how at Princeton, "all these Reformed people come to seminary who haven't seen an image or an icon in church in 25 years. It's been straight-up Reformed, 'let's make the Word the Word,' no decorations. But these students flock to Trinity Episcopal Church across the street for the evening vespers to get their shot of mystery! To find something that they feel is missing. And when they go out and become pastors, their Presbyterian churches won't be just words, because they are trying to reappropriate something that they feel is authentic to their tradition of faith, but has not been practiced by their tradition for a long, long time."

## ***Hopelessness, Death, and Salvation***

The youth ministry practitioners and professors noted that in their work with youth, the idea of hopelessness and death was prevalent, and was often an impetus for youth to turn to religious communities or faith practices. "The 13<sup>th</sup> Generation and Generation X have faced one death after another," said Martinson, "largely the death of hopes, but actual deaths as well: overdose, shootings, the death of their parents' marriage. In some of the schools where we do interviews, the gangsta wannabes don't even understand that the rap songs speak to their pain, alienation, hurt. Some are black, but some are white suburban kids. They have no real soul connection in terms of relationships, but they have soul connection in terms of the

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music. The rappers are giving voice to their experiences.”

“Cornell West talks about the hopelessness of teenagers, especially as he looked at inner-city youth and what’s going on there,” Parker said. “I would suggest that the hopelessness is around the issues of violence, death, and racism.” Parker noted that African American youth think of heaven (though they do not use that word) and “being saved” in terms of finding refuge from the hopelessness of their present realities.



*Kenda Creasy Dean*

### ***Tragedy as an Opportunity for Faith***

The youth ministry practitioners noted that nationally televised tragedies, such as the shooting at Columbine High School, have galvanized youth around issues of faith. Said Kenda Dean, “They have appropriated the Columbine story, made it their own story. Something happened at Columbine which rang true for them. Not only did they consider the possibility that such a tragedy might occur in their own schools, but they circulated and internalized the Cassie Bernall story [the young woman who was shot after allegedly professing her belief in God]. They sent it around the

Internet, e-mail by kids to kids, long before the media ever reported it. But what was true about that story had nothing to do with who said ‘YES’ in that library. It had to do with the fact that there was a martyr. That massacre became a martyrdom based on the fact that a teenager, one of their own, could look in the face of a gun bearer with guts enough to say what she believed.

**Dean:** These are kids who are dying for something worth dying for. There’s only so much bubble gum and pizza they can take. Kids have been telling us for 25 years: Enough already with the icebreakers. Give us something worth dying for. Then I’ll come. The underexpectation of teenagers is rampant in the culture, and even more rampant in church – the very place that is supposed to call them to something worth dying for. How ironic.

### ***Practical Expressions of Faith***

Participants agreed that today’s youth indicate they can “see God or Jesus at work” when they make a constructive contribution to another person’s life through mission trips, mentoring, or service learning experiences. Youth report that these practical opportunities are “significant – they provide hope and meaning.” Some churches have identified this opportunity, and are engaging youth in service experiences that have the capacity to change the lives of both the youth involved *and* the people or communities they are serving.

**Martinson:** There’s a sense that God is at work in this, and this is not just practices, not just rational thinking. It’s not just liturgical dance. This is a transcendent reality that’s come among us and is influencing the affairs of human kind, changing things, a new symbol of hope.



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## **The Church and Youth Ministry: How Are Youth Served?**

The UNC team expressed their hope that the results of the research project might have practical implications for denominations and youth ministers, as well as youth. They asked meeting participants to discuss the state of youth ministry, the role it plays in serving youth, and its resources, strengths, and weaknesses in fulfilling that role.

Participants said that while there are ongoing attempts to professionalize youth ministry, and a significant number of people serve in the capacity of youth ministers, the work has not yet achieved professional status. “Ten years ago there were just a handful of youth ministers,” said Dean Borgman, “and now there’s an explosion – there’s been incredible growth. But still, we are a pseudo-profession. There is research, there are some societies now, professional bodies beginning to form, but still there’s no agreement or licensing body or association.”

The growth, according to participants, has been driven by several factors, including the fact that there are more children alive now than ever before in America, the high profile of tragedy and dysfunction in families and communities, and the shift from an industrial to an information age. “We’re not sure of ourselves in terms of how to socialize the next generations,” said Martinson.

During this discussion, participants pointed to recent studies that advise churches that want to “grow” their congregations to dedicate some part of their ministry to children and youth, as a strategy for bringing Baby Boomers back into church. “What that’s done,” said Martinson,

“is raise the profile of youth ministry, raise the salaries, expand the numbers, create neuralgia in the system, and prompt high levels of interest and leverage.” A dearth of qualified and effective leadership in the field has accompanied this rapid growth in demand, noted the practitioners.

For Catholics, according to Bob McCarty, the primary form of youth ministry prior to Vatican II was Catholic school education. When youth ministry began to grow in the 1960s, Catholics shied away from “ministry” language, thinking it sounded “too Protestant.” They formed CYOs (Catholic Youth Organizations) to try to engage and address the needs of youth. “But since the 1970s,” says McCarty, “we have reclaimed the word *ministry*, not just for youth ministry, but more broadly. While we try to minister to the young people who are not in our schools, we still don’t have a Catholic college where you can get a degree in youth ministry. Our seminaries do a nonexistent job of preparing people to work with young people. Our seminaries prepare theologians; they don’t prepare pastoral ministers.”

This notion of “falling short” of the goals of youth ministry was common for all the youth ministry practitioners present, across denominations. In the last several decades, the major work on youth ministry has shifted from denominations and judicatories to congregations and parachurch organizations, and to seminaries, universities, and colleges as well. These groups have a vested interest in youth ministry and are prepared to respond quickly to changes in consciousness and popular culture. But, by and large, they don’t have substantial resources to put into this work. “Congregations are incredibly imaginative these days, and are looking for resources,”

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noted Martinson. “By offering resources for research and dissemination, Lilly Endowment is a far more influential player in how information on youths’ religious practices are understood in my faith community than the judicatory or national levels of churches in America.”

### ***Youth Church***

Youth ministries take a multitude of approaches to attracting and engaging youth in faith practices. Evelyn Parker referred to the books *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry* by William Meyers and Charles Foster and Grant Shockley’s *Working with Black Youth* as offering valuable perspective about youth ministry in an African American context.

Current trends, specifically in urban settings, show a move toward “youth church,” where youth do everything but preach the sermon. “The youth pastor preaches,” said Parker, “but the youth are the stewards and stewardesses, they wear white, take up the money, and are in the choir and band. They are everything. The adults are in another building.”

Dean added that a number of Korean students in Princeton also conduct youth church, but not for the same reasons as the African American youth. “It’s language,” she said. “Kids don’t speak the same language as their parents. So they have created youth church as a place where they can speak English. Youth church is out there in different forms and for different reasons that are all related to the culture.”

**Parker:** With this new phenomenon of youth church, I wonder how seriously teenagers take communion? When I grew up, everyone took communion. You’d see fathers giving their son or daughter the bread or the wine, usually, or you’d see the mother doing that. To do that with people I knew really loved me, not only my parents, but kin, was a very special moment. Today, in my own congregation, youth are not being socialized in a way that makes them appreciate the mysticism of the liturgical experience.

### **Brainstorming: What a Study on the Religious and Spiritual Practices of Youth Could Be**

The UNC team asked participants to outline the kinds of information and results they would like to glean from the proposed study. Their responses follow.



***Dean Borgman***

**Borgman:** I would like to see a research project that would generate surveys that practitioners could use in local situations and compare to the national results. For example, in my work, I take *Teen* magazine surveys that are done nationally and have youth leaders do them locally to compare their results to the national results. This almost always leads to provocative and challenging discussion. If there would be a

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simple survey device – add water and stir, put this transparency over that one, get out your calculator and add it up – then I think the research project would have more lasting impact.

I'd also like to see matrices showing the movement from spirituality into religious identity – this movement from “first” to “last name.” The matrix might run from extreme individualism through a sense of longing and then to communal identity. If we could get something like that, and then put it on a CD ROM for broader use, it would be really valuable in showing how youth fit into the ever-changing youth culture and subcultures, how people are moving through this crazy world to find themselves, and how they're integrating their own sense of transcendence or relationship with God to some kind of communal life in a faith community.

**Borgman:** With this study, you will be right on the cusp of faith becoming an important factor in the secular world. Many studies in the '80s and '90s dealt with all the critical factors affecting youth, but omitted faith. It's a terrible omission. Now people like James Garbarino in *Lost Voice* and Robert Coles in *The Ongoing Journey* are including it. Coles says boys need three anchors: spiritual, psychological, and social – and he puts them in *that* order. It's an appropriate time for this faith-based movement.

**Dean:** I want the big picture, but not just raw data. I am interested in the UNC team's interpretation of the study's results. I want to know what it makes you think about kids and the church. I want to know what difference these religious practices make in “who I am” as an adolescent and as a person. The study can provide in some ways an alternative curriculum for the kind of work that we do, a way of looking at

formation that we haven't been able to see very well.

The study will also accomplish what we often talk about as the first task of practical theology: it will thematize practices in ways we don't necessarily see so that we can evaluate them better and start reconstructing them into what we would hope they would be. Finally, I would like to see the project enlist theological education, the institutes for youth ministry that are popping up all over the place, the entrepreneurial folks in youth ministry, denominations, curriculum specialists, publishers – basically, all those who are in the business of resourcing the church.

**Martinson:** I'd like to see your study demonstrate a thick awareness of the nature of how God experience works. To be a believer is to believe something. To have faith is for faith to have content. To be someone who values is for values to have content. I want to know if you have any sense of what the narratives are, what the content of their beliefs and values are. And I want to know if these narratives, beliefs, and values have coherence? Are they integrated with action, ways of organizing life, ways of living out life? To have a map of youths' narratives and practices would be incredibly helpful.

**McCarty:** It would be useful to me if your study did the following things:

1. Further unpack the personal/communal identity issue – the difference between spirituality and religion, faith and religion – and the factors that impact the development of communal identity.
2. Shed light on how religious or faith practices impact the actions of youth.

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What helps young people live lives of discipleship, or lives of justice? How does it impact moral decision making?

3. Offer insight into what impacts young people in choosing and engaging in ministry roles. What kinds of experiences cause them to become us? This is bigger than “ordained or not ordained,” it’s the call to lay ministry. Where is the next wave of youth ministers coming from and what should we be doing to help them live out their faith in this way?
4. Help develop a second wave of resource materials in conjunction with people who use ministry language. That’s got to be a collaborative event. I hope that *your* study puts the language on *our* experience, and that when we read the study we say, “Of course that’s right! We knew that! We just didn’t have the language for it.”
5. Inform and influence foundations and church leadership so that they’ll want to better support our work. If your study builds the case that this is important work, and that youth are important to the health of our country, then we may be held in higher esteem and have better access to financial resources.
6. Help the church and the country see youth as a gift to be shared. Youth are not a problem to be solved. They’re a gift to be shared. The way we work with youth, the programming we do, all depends on our fundamental image of them.



*Bob McCarty*

**McCarty:** I’ve come to believe about youth ministry that the thing we need to do is provide good memories. Good memories are the roots that give kids something to come back to. We had a terrible mentality that said something like, “In adolescence and young adulthood kids are going to pull away from the church. That’s normal. They’re going to go to college, and they’re going to come back when they get married, and their kids are going to be baptized, and they’ll want their kids to go to school here.” Well, research says that’s not happening. The rules have changed. I like to use the image of map and territory. A map is only good if it matches the territory. If the territory changes and you don’t update your map, you’re going to be lost. And in the church now, it’s a different territory. If we don’t update our maps, we’re not going to minister effectively.

**Parker:** I’d like your study to help us understand spirituality as young people understand it. If you give me in-depth information on a defined group of people, 15-18 or 12-14, and have a balanced sample in terms of class, race, and other parameters, I can hold that information against other information in theological education and draw some conclusions. It would also inform my own work. I want you to do the work that I know I can’t do because I don’t have the skills or the know-how. But I want to be able to trust that you did some in-



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depth, very specific work to get at the whole idea of spirituality.

## **Methodology: Suggestions for the Research Design and Process**

### ***Collaboration with Youth***

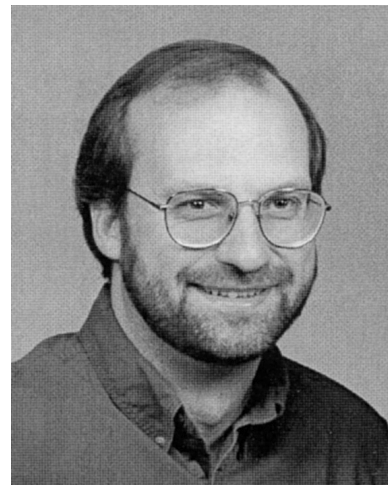
Participants felt strongly that youth should be engaged in shaping the language, shaping the questions, and interpreting and reflecting on the results of the study. “That’s important,” said Martinson, “because alongside UNC’s disciplinary expertise, which gives this project validity, young people’s consciousness, their experience, is critical in terms of sharing the power of meaning and interpreting meaning.”

Commenting on the importance of engaging youth early in the research project, rather than just interviewing them later in the process, Parker noted, “The authors of the book project on Christian practices for teens are now fully engaging teenagers in the process. They are bringing teens together to shape the project. Some teens have heavily edited chapters, saying, ‘This does not work for me,’ or ‘I really like images, or this is something I do.’ The book will result in the teen practices that these young people completely own.”

### ***Collaboration with Churches, Youth Ministers***

Participants also expressed a great desire for church and youth ministry representatives to be involved throughout the project. “There is not right now a credible place to glean research that can help the church and that is at the same time friendly to the church and what the church is trying to do,” said Dean. “I know that’s not your objective – to transform the church.

And that doesn’t need to be your objective. But you’re about to model a way to do youth ministry research which we need to know. Not many others are doing it. You’re also about to model, whether you like it or not, a way of being in relationship with kids that looks a lot like ministry to anybody who does it, and you’re in a position to help shape the church. But I don’t want you to do that without me. If you’re going to shape the church, I want the church in on it.”



*Christian Smith*

### ***The Survey Sample***

The group spent a significant amount of time discussing the survey sample and whom should be included in the study. Some of the suggestions and considerations mentioned included:

- Be *clear and up-front* about who is in your sample. “Let us know your parameters, we can work from there. All too often, we haven’t been told the parameters in most studies.”
- Use the survey to learn more about populations that have not been studied and are often overlooked. Possible inclusions would be youth in *lower class, rural communities; Asian*



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*Americans; Native Americans; and handicapped youth.*

- Consider including youth who have *dropped out* of school, are in *reformatory school* or youth versions of *prison*, and who are *extremely marginalized* in our society.
- Build on the national survey with in-depth, qualitative interviews that focus not only on different regions of the country, but also on a few *oversampled groups*, like African Americans, Hispanics, or southeast Asians.

### ***Capacity of the Interviewers***

Participants expressed interest in the idea that the interviewers would be conducting in-depth conversations with youth about their personal beliefs, values, and practices. They noted that this type of research is in essence a form of youth ministry, and that interviewers should be prepared and appropriately respectful. “So many people are manipulating kids today by doing studies, when young people are yearning for someone to listen and connect with them, someone to hear into voice their fragmented thoughts that do not have a narrative,” said Martinson. “If out of this research comes some impetus, tool, some vehicle for listening into voice, it will become a major addition to youth ministry itself.”

Responding to Martinson’s insight, Evelyn Parker reiterated her view that understanding death and the grieving process were thematically important topics among the inner-city youth she has interviewed: “One young man I talked with spent two hours on his experience of his mother dying when he was five. She died of

complications from diabetes. And I thought, as he was talking, that he had never had the opportunity to work this through – no one had invited him, no one listened, just listened to what he had to say. And he needed to talk about this. I had used the metaphor up front that if your life was a book, what would the chapters be, and what would be the content of those chapters? And he went on for two hours about the whole process of his mother dying. But as we all know when we talk to teenagers, they will thank you in the end for listening. And it’s the most rewarding thing – to reward you for the ministry you’ve done in just listening to their stories.”

Given the diversity of the proposed sample, Dean commented on the importance of having a diverse team of interviewers: “At Princeton, we had to train some interviewers from outside the project team so that we could match African American interviewers with African American youth.” Parker noted that youth might respond best to people who are somewhat like them. She ranked the characteristics on which she would match interviewer and interviewee as first race and then social class. “In either case, you have to be a person who brings a ministry of listening,” she said.

### ***Pitfalls***

When asked about “pitfalls,” or actions that might seriously compromise the research project, the participants noted:

- *Lack of collaboration with faith communities.* Across the board, participants noted that involving representatives from the church and youth ministry practitioners in the process would increase the credibility and reach of the study.

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- *Lack of variety in the survey sample.* Most studies have failed to reach a range of felons, inner city children, rural or desperately poor children, handicapped children, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and so on.
  - *Lack of collaboration with youth.* By involving youth in the study, the team could ensure more accurate elicitation of responses and more accurate interpretation of results.

## Dissemination: Getting the Results Out to the Appropriate Audiences

Smith explained that an important part of the planning process for this project was dissemination. “How can we attempt to get our research findings out to people who might actually use them?” he asked. The group discussed dissemination strategies, generated ideas, and offered the following recommendations.

Participants returned time and again to the use of the **internet** to publicize the research project and findings, and to invite feedback from various audiences. “It would be really interesting to have a thickly layered hyper text web page with a regularly changing home page. From the hyper text we could go and see the quantitative and qualitative instruments you were using,” said Martinson. “Out of this we might look at where various elements of your research are emerging – with caveats. If you did a literature search, for example, you might have the literature search layered, so one could look at the whole thing or specific elements of it. There could also be various interactive pieces, including chat rooms and bulletin boards that keep people in conversation with you.”

A second focus area for dissemination was **presentations and convenings**. Participants thought it would be valuable for the project team to prepare a presentation out of the research findings that could be used as the centerpiece for small-to medium-sized conferences. “I’m a great fan of executive summaries,” said McCarty. “If you can take this multipage document and get it into five pages, I could see presentations. I could see someone from this study coming to our organizational meeting and talking to the leaders of Catholic ministry about the findings.”

McCarty raised the possibility that sending out a study with UNC’s name on the front might prompt the reaction: “Is this just another university study about our kids? What do they know? Are they working with our kids?” He suggested that by sending out an executive summary with a **cover letter from a denominational, judicatory, or congregational leader**, the study might be received more positively.

“What if you do the research, you have the data, and then you have a big conference with a variety of people. In the process, you ask those thinkers and practitioners to reflect critically on this body of information, and then disseminate *those* papers and reflections too?” suggested Parker. “You’d have multi-layers and voices engaged in the process. For me that **second round with more reflection on the data** would be very helpful.”

In addition to convenings, participants thought the research might result in powerful **education materials and resources** that could be used by churches, denominations, youth ministry groups, and others working in the area of youth and

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religion. For example, participants might send students from their classes out to congregations to conduct similar surveys that can be compared to the national survey results. “They’d put in 20 hours in a congregation,” said Martinson. “And as they’re doing it, your research is expanded. It continues to be conducted. All of that gets fed back into my class, it gets fed back into their ministries, and so forth.”

Being deliberate about **building relationships** over the course of the project was another suggestion for increasing the audience and potential use of the results. Working with various theoreticians and practitioners at universities and seminaries, denominations, and parachurch groups to identify questions and research needs, and using these people as a channel for ongoing communication about the findings would build a valuable network of partners in the project. Participants noted that contacts already made with the Public Advisory Board members and the present group of youth ministry practitioners “has gotten the project off to a very good start,” as each of those individuals has a relevant sphere of influence with which to share information about the project. Borgman suggested that groups like Communities and Schools (CAS) in Alexandria, Virginia, can provide access to communities and local leaders across the country. Parker recommended contacting pastors of large, successful congregations, to put information in their newsletters and web sites.

Finally, when the planning team asked for feedback about hiring a **communications director** to manage the dissemination process, participants felt that that person could initiate timely information “leaks” to publicize the research and could help manage the relationships described

above, maintain the interactive web site, and coordinate presentations and convenings.

## Conclusions

The meeting concluded on a note of great optimism, as participants felt that the UNC team had undertaken some important first steps just by inviting others from outside the discipline of sociology to contribute ideas to the project design process. Participants felt the project planning team had created an environment of mutual respect among sociologists and youth ministry practitioners that would no doubt prove fruitful in future work.

In addition, participants praised Lilly Endowment’s willingness to explore a potential research project on the religious and spiritual practices of youth. They acknowledged the need for credible research and data about youth in their work and expressed confidence that the UNC proposed project would lay the groundwork for much needed resources and theory about how to minister to youth effectively.<sup>f</sup>

## Project Information

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For more information about the *Religious and Spiritual Practices of American Youth* planning project, please contact Dr. Christian Smith, primary investigator, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill at [cssmith@email.unc.edu](mailto:cssmith@email.unc.edu)

Or visit the project’s web site at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

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