RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE STUDY NOTES

Youth Development and Faith-Based Institutions

Faith-based organizations have long been important providers of services to young people and the broader community, creating links between youth, families, and the community. Research on faith-based institutions and the role of religious organizations, such as churches and synagogues, suggests that they can contribute to community-wide efforts to promote youth development in several key areas, helping to reduce risky behaviors, building a value base from which young people make decisions, and involving a variety of people across the life span. While schools and social service agencies reach only targeted populations, congregations often touch a cross-section of the population.

National Research Council,
Academy of Medicine, 2002[1]

"A season is set for everything…"

Ecclesiastes 3:1

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a season of growth, exploration, excitement, and opportunities. Leaders of religious communities are dedicated to guiding young people through adolescence based on their commitment to young people's spiritual and moral development, and because they recognize that adult guidance, supervision, and involvement supports the well-being and future of the youth entrusted to their care.

Congregations and denominations in the United States today continue a more than two hundred- year-old religious commitment to the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of the nation's young people. For example, the YMCA and the YWCA began as religious programs serving youth, and the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia started the very first national youth program in 1831.[2] At least one in five organizations serving youth across the United States is a religious institution. Indeed, outside of the public schools, religious institutions serve more young people than any other community institution. More than 60 percent of American teens report that they spend at least one hour per week in activities in a church or synagogue; three- quarters of teens say religion is at least somewhat important to them, including almost half who say it is very important.[3]

A secular research-based approach to serving young people, known as *youth development*, has emerged over the past 15 years. Many of the lessons of this movement, as described in detail below, will not be new or revelatory to youth ministers. In the words of one of the seminal reports, the movement is *"an approach to youth work that provides supportive relationships, environments, and opportunities to nurture growth-enhancing values, skills, and commitments in adolescents."*[4] Rather than emphasizing preventing the problems of young people, youth development seeks to address positive outcomes for all young people. Another report says *"positive youth development encompasses all our hopes and aspirations for a nation of healthy, happy, and competent adolescents on their way to productive and satisfying adulthoods."*[5] It continues,

"youth development programs seek to enhance not only adolescents' skills, but also their confidence in themselves and their future, their character, and their connections to other people and institutions by creating environments, both at and away from the program, where youth can feel supported and empowered."[6]

Based on these definitions, it would seem that religious institutions have a lot to teach secular youth programs. For most of their histories, religious institutions have had these same goals for their youth programs. And, indeed, faith-based institutions do have lessons to share.

Yet religious leaders and youth workers can learn from the secular youth development movement as well. This STUDY NOTE is designed to help bridge those gaps in each group's awareness of the other. Religious communities can incorporate into their youth programs the insights of the youth development movement. The youth development movement can in turn embrace the hundreds of thousands of congregations across the United States as a resource to encourage the development of young people. The Religious Institute believes that religious institutions can integrate the insights of the youth development movement into youth ministries, and that congregations can find new ways to work with other community partners committed to youth development.

EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Youth development programs are more effective in reducing risky behaviors than approaches that address single behaviors alone. Youth development programs have had a positive impact on decreasing violence, alcohol, drugs, school failure, and premature involvement in sexual behaviors. In one study of 25 programs, nineteen produced positive changes in the behavior of participating youth in such matters as "interpersonal skills, quality of peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem solving, cognitive competences, self efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement." All but one program resulted in "significant improvement" in overcoming "problem behaviors"— particularly, drug and alcohol use, school misbehavior, aggressive behavior, violence, truancy, high-risk sexual behavior, and smoking.[10]

The literature on youth development suggests a range of program characteristics that are important for serving young people. In a recent review of the literature on youth development programs, the National Research Council identified eight features of settings that promote positive youth development. They are:
1. Physical and psychological safety
2. Clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision

3. Supportive relationships
4. Opportunity to belong
5. Positive social norms
6. Support for efficacy and mattering
7. Skill building, and
8. Integration of family, school, and community efforts.[11]

The Search Institute developed the "Assets Approach" to youth development. The first 20 developmental assets focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives and are directly relevant to religious institutions. Four categories of external assets are included in the framework:

Support. Young people need to experience support, respect, and love from their families, neighbors, and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.

Empowerment. Young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure.

Boundaries and expectations. Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are "in bounds" or "out of bounds."

Constructive use of time. Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth.[12]

Both the National Research Council and Search Institute schema readily describe youth programs in religious settings. Other researchers have further identified the components of each of these areas that contribute to youth development. It is in these more refined areas that there may be opportunities for improved youth ministries.

The directors of the National Center for Children and Families have developed a framework they call the 5 Cs. They say effective programs must address:

- Competence
- Confidence
- Connection
- Character
- Compassion[13]

We have added an important 6th C for Continuity, based on the review of the literature.

- **Competence**: In the words of the National Governor's Association 2000 report on youth development, "the main goal of positive youth development strategies is to help youth become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent".[14] Competence includes promoting academic, vocational, health promotion, and social skills. These social skills include communication skills such as assertiveness, refusal skills, conflict resolution, and decision-making, as well as future planning skills.

- **Confidence:** Young people need help to develop a positive self-identity. Programs assist young people in developing a sense of self-efficacy, autonomy, and age- appropriate independence. They gain confidence through challenging opportunities, and "formal and informal opportunities…to nurture their interests and talents…and practice new skills."[15] Sports, recreation, and the arts, as well as opportunities to broad their horizons beyond their own neighborhood, give young people the chance to try different types of activities. By actively involving youth in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs directed towards them, youth become respected partners in youth programs.

- **Connection**: Young people need to feel that they belong and that they matter. Youth experience a strong sense of membership in the youth program and a commitment from the religious institution. They also need a sense of individual or group recognition. They need a close sense of connection with the youth leader, but also opportunities for bonding with other adults and younger children. Young people are offered the opportunity to develop stronger friendship skills. Further, programs can encourage young people to feel a connection to their larger community and world.

- **Character:** Programs must promote positive values, individual integrity, and moral commitment. Successful programs have explicit rules and expectations for adolescent behaviors and responsibilities, and youth are involved in setting those standards and expectations. Young people are assisted in managing their feelings, clarifying their values, and making decisions consistent with those values. Faith and spiritual development is an essential component of character building in religious institutions.

- **COMPASSION:** Youth thrive when they have the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. Effective programs help young people develop an appreciation and respect for diversity through opportunities for multicultural interactions. They provide an opportunity for young people to develop a sense of morality and social justice. Service learning projects, community volunteer opportunities, and mission trips all offer young people an opportunity to "give back" while developing their own sense of compassion and mastery. In the words of the National Center for Children and Families, community service offers young people opportunities to "build skills, engage in real and challenging activities, and broaden their horizons."[16]

- **CONTINUITY:** Young people need to be able to depend on the program to provide a reliable format, structure, and adult leadership. Programs need to offer a long-term commitment to young people, and are most effective if services are offered through the school year and the summer months. When programs are only offered September through June, there must be ways for young people to access caring adults during the summer months. Further, there needs to be a sense of continuity and consistency across multiple years. Programs can adopt a developmental approach that assures that each subsequent year builds on previous experiences and programs.

FINDINGS FROM THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE SURVEY

In the spring of 2003, the Religious Institute, under the auspices of its parent organization, the Christian Community, surveyed the departments of youth ministry at the 28 largest denominations and religious organizations that serve Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist youth in the United States. The goal of the survey was to assess their familiarity with the youth development literature as well as their encouragement of effective characteristics of youth development programs in their congregations and youth programs.

A survey was developed based on the secular literature on youth development programs as well as knowledge of youth ministry programs. It was pilot tested with the directors of youth ministry at two national denominations and five local congregations.

Refinements were then made to the final survey instrument.

After three rounds of follow-up calls, 19 denominations and national religious-based youth-serving organizations responded to the survey. They include a broad spectrum of Christian and Jewish organizations that serve young people. (A complete list of responding organizations is included in the Box on page 5.) Two Muslim youth organizations were also contacted but did not return the surveys. The generalizability of the findings of this report is clearly limited by the small number of responding denominations, as they represent only a piece of the changing American religious landscape. However, together these organizations represent at least 30 million people who are members of religious communities in the United States.[17]

In order to further assess the implementation of these characteristics of effective youth programs, each respondent was asked to provide the names of three congregations that were known to have outstanding youth programs. Only six were able to do so. Nevertheless, in order to provide a check on the validity of the denomination responses, 17 local congregations were sent a survey adapted for congregation use. Thirteen responded. In most cases, local congregation responses mirrored the results of the national respondent survey results.

The denomination and the congregation surveys revealed that religious institutions are playing a strong role in serving young people. *A major finding from this survey is that, despite the differences in polity, theological perspective, history, and tradition, the respondents reported similar areas of strengths and commitments to service for young people, as well as similar areas of potential growth.* The Box on page 6 summarizes these shared strengths as well as the opportunities for improved service.

It is important to remember, according to the Search Institute, "The congregation's socializing role with young people extends far beyond the activities or curricula that are used in youth programming or religious education."[18] Although this research focused specifically on the characteristics of the youth program, young people are influenced by the "culture or climate of the congregation, the quality of relationships within the community, and the range and quality of programs or activities in which young people participate."[19]

As might be anticipated, the national respondents and the congregations were strongest in the areas of

National Respondents

American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.
B'nai B'rith
Church of the Brethren
Church of God
Cumberland Presbyterian Church
The Evangelical Free Church of America
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry
National Network of Youth Ministries
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Progressive National Baptist Convention
Reformed Church in America

Southern Baptist Convention
Union of American Hebrew Congregations
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ
The United Methodist Church
United Synagogue Youth

Local Congregations

Church of the Brethren
Cumberland Presbyterian
Evangelical Free Church
Greek Orthodox
Roman Catholic
Unitarian Universalist

character development, providing young people with a sense of connection, offering them a chance to make a difference, and developing social skills. Every one of the denominations reported that character building as well as the opportunity for leadership were components of its programs. More than 85 percent of the denominations offered decision-making skills, youth-led worship opportunities, parent/family involvement activities, and community service, volunteer and youth recognition opportunities.

∞ COMPETENCE. The respondents report significant involvement in helping young people develop social competencies; however, academic, cognitive, and vocational competencies are generally not part of youth programming at the congregation. Character building, decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication skills are generally included. Of note, newer areas of social competency building, such as assertiveness training, refusal skills, peer mediation, and media literacy are encouraged by only a few of the denominations and offered by just a handful of the congregations.

Only a few of the denominations and the congregations offer efforts to improve academic, cognitive, or vocational competencies. Slightly more than half of the national respondents said that they encouraged programs to include career choice and future planning, and only a third of the local congregations actu-

ally did so. Just one of the national respondents encourages monitoring school achievement, five encourage homework assistance or tutoring, and six support academic instruction. Only one in six of the local congregations did work in these areas. Encouragement of vocational development was even less likely: only four of the national respondents encourage work skills, two offer employment preparation, and two offer employment opportunities.

Similar to the areas of education and employment, most of the denominations could do more in the area of health promotion and risk reduction. Although 84 percent of the national respondents reported encouraging sexuality education, less than a third reported activities in health education, and only one of the local congregations offered health education. Some religious communities may feel that school, work, and health issues should be left to other sectors. Yet, scripture and tradition teach that faith leaders must be concerned with the whole person. Mirroring this commitment, the youth development approach recognizes that each sector serving young people should address the whole adolescent. According to the Search Institute, "no program focusing on the moral character or religious development of youth people will be successful if it does not address those issues in the context of the physical, intellectual, social and emotional issues that are also tied to…religious development."[20]

Strengths and Opportunities

STRENGTHS

(Program components reported by at least two-thirds of the national and local congregations' respondents.)

- Personal skill development: Decision-making, conflict resolution, character building, and communication skills

- Opportunities for recognition: Youth-led worship & youth recognition

- Confidence: Youth leadership and empowerment

- Faith development: Religious education & Bible study

- Connection: Parental/family involvement, multicultural interactions, interactions with adults in congregation, intergenerational activities, mentoring

- Compassion: Service projects for youth, community service, volunteer opportunities, mission trips in the U.S. and abroad

- Broaden youth horizons: Art, music, theater, recreation programs, sports, and cultural activities

- Health promotion and risk reduction: Prevention of sexual abuse and harassment, sexuality education, encouraging abstinence, peer education

- Inclusiveness: Welcoming disabled youth

OPPORTUNITIES

(Program components reported by less than one-third of the national or local respondents.)

- Vocational competence: Work skills, employment preparation, and employment opportunities

- Educational competence: Monitoring school achievement, homework assistance, tutoring, academic instruction

- Skill Development: Assertiveness training, refusal skills, peer mediation, and media literacy

- Community involvement: Opening after school programs to all neighborhood youth, referrals to community resources, staff participation in community coalitions

- Health promotion and risk reduction: Health education, explicit prevention goals for young people's behaviors, referrals to community-based sexual health organizations, health fairs, support groups for young people with specific health and social issues

- Inclusion: Welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth

- Evaluations of youth programs

CONFIDENCE. Overall, the religious institutions report providing challenging opportunities for the young people they serve. Almost nine in ten of the national respondents encourage and slightly more of the local congregations offer youth the opportunity to provide youth-led worship. More than two-thirds of the national respondents and the local congregations say that they encourage or offer creative programs such as art, music, and theater, as well as recreation programs and sports. Although two-thirds of the national respondents said that congregations are encouraged to offer young people cultural opportunities and field trips, less than half of the local congregations said that they actually did so. Formal and informal opportunities for youth recognition also encourage confidence in young people; 95 percent of the national respondents encouraged this type of recognition, and two-thirds of the congregations indicated that it was part of their programming. Young

people have an important role to play in sharing the leadership of programs, not just participating in adult-led programs for young people.

CONNECTION. Not surprisingly, this is one of the areas of greatest strength for youth development programs. Youth programs in congregations offer young people a sense of belonging. More than three-quarters of the national respondents and the local congregations included opportunities for formal interactions with the adults in the congregation, parent/family involvement in youth programs, multi-cultural interactions, intergenerational activities, and mentoring programs.

In contrast, almost half of the denominations say that programs are not encouraged to offer young people the opportunity for formalized interactions with the ministers or rabbis in the congregation, and one in three of the model congregations do not do so. Such interaction, even if it is only episodic, models a

commitment to young people on behalf of the congregation and provides important adult connection.

There is also opportunity for the youth development programs at faith-based institutions to become more connected themselves to the community and its resources. Only four in ten of the denominations encourage referrals to community resources, and only a third of the congregations did so. Even fewer encouraged or made referrals to community-based sexual health organizations. Only 15 percent of the national respondents encouraged involvement in community youth coalitions, while 60 percent of the local congregations did not participate in these types of coalitions.

❧ **CHARACTER.** As noted above, all of the national respondents emphasized character building as a central component of youth programs. More than three-quarters of the national respondents encourage religious education and Bible study, and three-quarters of the congregations offer them to youth. Most, as noted below, offer young people the opportunity to perform meaningful service in their communities.

However, there is more that faith communities can do to encourage character development. The secular youth development literature emphasizes the importance of setting clear standards for youth behavior and consequences for infractions. One-third of the denominations and half of the congregations do not have such clear standards for teens' behavior at worship, youth group meetings, overnights, and the like. Of those that did, not all involved youth in the development of those guidelines. Such standards need to be set at the congregation level, with the full involvement of the young people in the youth group. In fact, it is a good idea to develop such a list each year as the new youth group convenes, and then to prominently post it during the year. Denominations can encourage the development of such standards at the local level. Even fewer denominations and congregations set explicit goals for youth regarding such outcomes as high school graduation, abstinence from alcohol, drugs, and sexual intercourse, or for teens to be pregnancy-free and STD-free. Denominational encouragement in these areas could help congregations develop pro-active efforts to promote healthy behavior and futures.

❧ **COMPASSION.** Effective youth development programs seek to develop caring and compassionate young adults and offer young people the opportunity to make

a difference in their communities. Almost 90 percent of the national respondents encourage community service, volunteer opportunities, and service projects for youth within the congregation itself. Indeed, as the Search Institute notes, service to others has become a central feature of youth work in many Christian and Jewish congregations.[21] All of the local congregations include community service and volunteer opportunities in their youth programs. Fifteen of the national respondents indicated that they encourage mission trips inside the United States and fourteen do so abroad. Nine of the congregations offer mission trips.

❧ **CONTINUITY.** One-third of the denominations (and 25 percent of the model congregations) offered programs that were only available during the September-June period, leaving young people without religious support during the summer months. Continuity during the entire year is an important characteristic of good youth programs.

❧ **TRAINING.** A major area that remains to be developed is the need for training for both professional and volunteer youth leaders. In 1991, in a report for the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Kenda Dean wrote, "Of all the gaps in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious youth programs, the most threatening is the lack of accessible adult leadership training."[22] In 1995, the Search Institute wrote, "Until leadership is strengthened through training and appropriate resources, it is unlikely that positive youth development will realize its potential in religious youth organizations."[23] In the Religious Institute study, although two-thirds of the national respondents reported that they had taken college or graduate level courses on adolescent growth and development, one-third had not, and 20 percent had not taken other workshops and seminars. The model congregation respondents reported slightly greater experience in courses, workshops, and seminars.

One hundred percent of the national respondents and one hundred percent of the congregation respondents, however, reported that they offer training for youth ministers and youth workers. On a positive note, eight in ten of the national respondents reported that they had had some direct experience as a volunteer or trainer at a local congregation during the past year. Of note, only one denomination reported that previous education was a requirement for serving young people

in that denomination, and none of the local congregations required any prior education. Even more surprising, two of the national respondents and two of the congregations required no training for lay or staff youth leaders. Four in ten of the national groups said that they do not offer in-service training at the denominational level and six in ten do not offer it at the district or congregational level. One- third of the congregations do not ask staff or volunteers who work with youth to attend training at the congregation, district, or denomination level.

Most of the national respondents and the model congregation respondents were not familiar with the seminal secular reports on youth development. These reports could provide a significant foundation for training opportunities. The majority of the national and the local respondents reported that they had either not heard of nor read the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's *A Matter of Time,* the Department of Health and Human Service's *Positive Youth Development in the United States,* the National Research Council's *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development,* or Public Private Venture's *Youth Development: Issues and Challenges.* These reports are listed on page 13, including information about obtaining them, and could be a valuable resource to those working in youth ministries.

❧ **PROGRAMS BY DEVELOPMENTAL AGE.** Adolescence is a time of great physical and emotional changes. Developmental theorists have identified the distinct developmental needs of early adolescents, middle adolescents, and late adolescents. Despite these wide ranges, 42 percent of the denominations report that at least some congregations offer a single youth group for all teenagers from 13 to 19, and all but one of the local congregations did so. The reality for many congregations is that they have only a handful of teenage members, and it would be impractical to split them into two groups. In this case, adult leaders need to be especially sensitive to the diverse developmental needs of the younger and older adolescents.

Less than half of the national respondents encouraged programs for young adult groups, ages 18 to 24. Less than a third encouraged programs for early adolescents (grades 7 and 8) although the need for such programming is particularly strong during those years when peer pressure peaks. Forty-two percent of the local congregations did report a middle school group.

❧ **SEXUALITY ISSUES.** The Religious Institute was pleasantly surprised to find that 84 percent of the national respondents and 83 percent of the model congregations indicated that they were providing sexuality education. In a 1994 survey, only 38 percent of mainline Protestant youth said that their congregation does a good or excellent job in helping young people develop their sexual values and behaviors.[24] In a national survey in 2000, the Christian Community found that only 14 percent of local congregations offered a comprehensive sexuality education program.[25] However, the Religious Institute survey did not ask about the content of these programs or whether curricula were available from the denomination. In a previous review, only half of the responding denominations reported that they had sexuality education curricula.[26] More follow-up is needed on this issue. However, this survey (and other research) indicates that there is significant room for improvement for religious institutions to become more involved in helping young people manage their sexual lives.

❧ Only half of the national respondents encourage teen-parent programs, and only one-quarter of the model programs offered them.

❧ One-third of the programs do not encourage abstinence for their teenagers, almost three-quarters do not have explicit goals for teens related to abstinence, and only ten percent have explicit goals for teens to be pregnancy-free and STD-free. Ten percent of the national respondents encourage the use of virginity pledges.

❧ Only one-third of the national respondents and only 42 percent of the model congregations indicated that they welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth. Only two of the national respondents reported that they encouraged support groups for GLBT youth and none of the model congregations had such a group. Yet, a recent study of teens active in diverse congregations across the United States found that as many as 14 percent of teens self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or unsure of their sexual orientation.[27]

❧ Only one-quarter of the national respondents encourage congregations to make referrals to community-based sexual health organizations, and only one of the thirteen model congregations actually did so.

Rate Yourself

Although no program will address every aspect of youth development, the program components listed below would be valuable components of a youth ministries program. How many areas are included in your program? Which areas are your greatest strengths? Which areas need the most development? Which areas could be added to your programs for youth?

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
∾ COMPETENCE: SOCIAL SKILLS				
Communication Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐
Assertiveness Training	☐	☐	☐	☐
Refusal Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conflict Resolution	☐	☐	☐	☐
Decision-Making	☐	☐	☐	☐
Goal Setting	☐	☐	☐	☐
Character Building	☐	☐	☐	☐
Media Literacy	☐	☐	☐	☐
∾ COMPETENCE: HEALTH PROMOTION				
Health Education	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sexuality Education	☐	☐	☐	☐
Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment	☐	☐	☐	☐
Abstinence Encouragement	☐	☐	☐	☐
Referrals to Community-based Sexual Health Organizations	☐	☐	☐	☐
Health Fairs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Peer Education (older teens teaching younger teens)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participation by Staff in Community Youth Coalitions	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guest Speakers on Alcohol and Drug Prevention	☐	☐	☐	☐
Guest Speakers on Sexuality Issues	☐	☐	☐	☐
∾ COMPETENCE: ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL SKILLS/PREPARATION				
Academic Instruction	☐	☐	☐	☐
Homework Assistance/Tutoring	☐	☐	☐	☐
Monitoring of School Achievement	☐	☐	☐	☐
Work Skills	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career Choice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Future Planning	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employment Preparation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employment Opportunities	☐	☐	☐	☐
∾ CONFIDENCE				
Youth-Led Worship Opportunities	☐	☐	☐	☐
Annual Youth Recognition/Awards in Congregation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Youth Leadership/Youth Empowerment	☐	☐	☐	☐
Creative Programs (Art, Music, Theater)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sports	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
Meditation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cultural Events/Opportunities	☐	☐	☐	☐
Field Trips	☐	☐	☐	☐
Peer Mediation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Recreation Programs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Leadership Experiences	☐	☐	☐	☐
Referrals to Community Resources	☐	☐	☐	☐

❧ CONNECTION

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
Parental/Family Involvement in Youth Activities	☐	☐	☐	☐
Intergenerational Activities	☐	☐	☐	☐
Multi-cultural Interactions	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mentoring	☐	☐	☐	☐
Interaction with Adults In Congregation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Formalized Interaction with Ministers in Congregation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Youth Welcomed	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teen Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Support Group(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Disabled Youth Welcomed	☐	☐	☐	☐
Disabled Youth Support Group(s)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teen Parent Program	☐	☐	☐	☐
Support Groups for Teens from Families Going Through Divorce	☐	☐	☐	☐
Support Groups for Teens with Eating Disorders	☐	☐	☐	☐

❧ CHARACTER

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
Religious Education	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bible Study	☐	☐	☐	☐
Youth Choir	☐	☐	☐	☐
Clear Standards for Behaviors and Consequences for Infractions	☐	☐	☐	☐
Youth Involvement in Establishing Clear Behaviors and Consequences	☐	☐	☐	☐
Explicit Goals for Youth re: High School Graduation	☐	☐	☐	☐
Explicit Goals for Youth re: Pregnancy-free and STD-free	☐	☐	☐	☐
Explicit Goals for Youth re: Abstinence from Alcohol	☐	☐	☐	☐
Explicit Goals for Youth re: Abstinence from Sexual Intercourse	☐	☐	☐	☐

❧ COMPASSION

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
Community Service/Volunteer Opportunities	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mission Trips in the U.S.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mission Trips Outside of the U.S.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Service Projects for the Congregation Itself	☐	☐	☐	☐

❧ CONTINUITY

	Included	Strength	Needs Development	Could Be Added
Programs available all year round	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff available to teens all year round	☐	☐	☐	☐
Programs based on developmental needs	☐	☐	☐	☐

RECOMMENDATIONS

In 1995, the Search Institute recommended "expanding the understanding of the scope of religious youth work to include a clear commitment to nurturing healthy development, a commitment to reaching out to all types of youth, an emphasis on supporting and educating families, a congregation-wide commitment to youth, and an emphasis on community outreach and networking on behalf of youth."[28]

And indeed, there has been positive movement in many of these areas. The Search Institute 1995 study concluded, "According to youth workers, the great majority of youth rarely experience in their congregations…community service projects, leadership development opportunities, discussions of sexuality, or special programs targeted to the prevention of negative behaviors."[29] In each of these areas, the 2003 Religious Institute survey found that denominations report significant activities. In addition, the Search Institute study "found youth decision-making to be one of the least well covered areas"[30] whereas in the 2003 Religious Institute survey, nearly 90 percent of the denominations/religious organizations report encouraging attention to decision-making, and 85 percent of the local congregations do so.

The following recommendations emerge from the findings of the 2003 Religious Institute survey and are directed to both denominations and national organizations concerned with youth ministries as well as local congregations. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that many denominations are facing severe financial pressures and that many youth departments have had their budgets and staffs reduced. Readers are encouraged to consider how these suggestions can be incorporated into existing denominational and congregational efforts. In some cases, recommended activities might be done through collaborative initiatives among religious institutions, or even with secular organizations, rather than through independent denomination efforts.

Underlying all of these recommendations is a commitment to the well-being and future of adolescents in congregations and youth groups. This promise to teenagers and their needs must begin at the highest level of the denomination and permeate all levels of the national office and all levels of the congregation. This includes not only engaging the ministers and the religious education staff, but the parents, families, and intergenerational community in valuing young people and their contributions. Faith communities must recommit themselves to serving young people.

Specific recommendations include:

- Provide professional staff and volunteers initial and ongoing training on both adolescent growth and development and the youth development approach.

- If the number of young people is large enough, try to offer programs by developmental age. A single youth group for all teenagers is unlikely to meet the developmental needs of young people. If possible, it is most effective to offer programs for early adolescents (middle school), middle adolescents/early high school (9th and 10th grades) and late adolescents (11th and 12th grade.) Try to have occasional separate activities for the younger and the older teens, and seek additional volunteers in the congregation to work with youth with differing needs.

- Assure continuity. Ideally, programs for teens should be available all year long. If that is not possible, arrange for some continuity and coverage for adolescents during the summer months.

- Begin to address the academic, cognitive, and vocational needs of the young people who are being served. Seek to include such issues as career choice, work skills, and employment preparation in the youth programming. At minimum, seek to know the educational needs of the young people in the program and connect them to their other needs. Consider offering homework assistance, tutoring, and academic skill strengthening as part of the youth programs.

- Integrate refusal skills (how to say "no"), assertiveness training (how to say "no" and mean it, nicely), peer mediation, and media literacy into existing programs aimed at personal skill development.

- Involve young people in setting the standards for their behaviors in the group, including clear consequences for infractions of those behaviors. Post standards prominently in the rooms where the youth group meets. Develop these standards each year with each new group of teens.

- Consider making programs available for youth who live in the neighborhood of the congregation, not just youth with families who are members.

❧ Ask the clergy to be involved with the youth program, attending a few of their functions each year or meeting with the young people. The attention of the senior clergy person, and not only the youth minister, demonstrates the congregation's commitment to youth.

❧ Involve youth in service to the congregation itself, including assistance with childcare, plant maintenance, fund raising, and worship.

❧ Develop and use a referral list of organizations that serve youth in the community; be sure to include youth- serving organizations such as the Y, Scouts, and Job Corps; health service organizations, including adolescent medicine clinics, Planned Parenthoods and sites for sexually transmitted disease counseling and testing; remedial education including mentoring and homework assistance, and support networks, including Al-Anon, gay and lesbian youth organizations, and community hotlines.

❧ Seek out and welcome youth that may be marginalized in other settings, including young people with disabilities; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth; and teen parents. Be sure to know and offer referrals to community support services for these youth.

❧ Make health promotion and risk reduction an explicit part of youth programming. Consider offering health and sexuality education, prevention of sexual abuse and harassment programs, teen parent programs, peer education programs, and health fairs.

❧ Become actively involved in community coalitions for youth. Be an active presence at community events. Provide secular leaders with the experience religious institutions have in engaging young people in community service, intergenerational activities, and leadership opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, this report raises as many new questions as it answers. How generalizable are the findings across the diverse religious landscape? How influential are denominations today in affecting programs at the congregation level? How are youth development concepts being implemented by congregations and faith-based youth programs at the local level across the United States? What type of commitment is needed to encourage youth departments to invest in training and support? Further research is clearly needed.

The secular youth development movement and those who work with youth in the context of religious traditions have much to offer each other. Youth ministries have an important role to play in an overall community strategy to promote youth development. Religious institutions can embrace in their own way the insights and resources of the youth development movement and seek to find ways of working with institutional partners in their communities. Those community partners will be richer and better able to fulfill their own missions if they recognize the important role that religious institutions have in shaping young people's lives and futures.

By working together, may we demonstrate our shared commitment to the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of the young people entrusted to our care. And so may it be.

Resources for More Information

**Center for Youth Development
and Policy Research**
Academy for Educational Development
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20009
202-884-8267
http://www.cyd.aed.org/cydpr.html

Building Partnerships for Youth
University of Arizona
PO Box 210033
Tuscon, AZ 85721
520-621-3399
http://msg.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs/index.cfm

Christian Community
6404 S. Calhoun Street
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46807
260-744-6510
http://www.churchstuff.com

National Study of Youth and Religion
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB # 3057
Chapel Hill, NC 27599
919-918-5294
http://www.youthandreligion.org

**The National Youth Development
Information Center**
1319 F Street, NW
Suite 601
Washington, DC 20004
1-877-NYDIC-4-U (Toll free)
http://www.nydic.org/nydic

Public Private Ventures (PPV)
200 Market Street
Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215-557-4400
http://www.ppv.org

**Religious Institute on Sexual Morality,
Justice, and Healing**
304 Main Avenue, # 335
Norwalk, CT 06851
203-840-1148
http://www.religiousinstitute.org

Search Institute
615 First Avenue NE
Suite 125
Minneapolis, MN 55413
800-888-7828
http://www.search-institute.org/congregations

Major Reports on Youth Development

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours.* New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Department of Health and Human Services. *Positive Youth Development in the U.S.* Washington, DC: DHHS, 1998.

Grantmakers in Health. *Positive Youth Development: A Pathway to Healthy Teens.* DC: Grantmakers in Health, 2002.

National Research Council. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development.* Washington, DC: National Research Council, 2002.

Public/Private Ventures. *Youth Development: Issues and Challenges.* PA: PPV, 2000.

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27. Clapp et. al., op.cit., 96.

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ABOUT THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE ON
SEXUAL MORALITY, JUSTICE, AND HEALING

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is an ecumenical, interfaith organization dedicated to advocating for
sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and society.

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Developing and supporting a network of clergy, religious educators, theologians,
ethicists, and other religious leaders committed to sexual justice.

∾

Building the capacity of religious institutions and clergy to offer comprehensive sexuality
education within the context of their own faith traditions and to advocate for sexual rights.

∾

Helping congregations become sexually healthy faith communities.

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Educating the public and policymakers about this religious
vision of sexual morality, justice, and healing.

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