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The Zoi Program: a new model for youth ministry

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Program Thesis

THE ZOI PROGRAM: A NEW MODEL FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents Ron and Nancy Marston

You have supported my education and my ministry since the day I was born.

Thank you for your constant and unconditional love.

To my daughters Rebecca, Caroline, and Jenna Coburn

You believed in me even when I had trouble believing in myself.

Thank you for your abiding and energetic love.

To my husband Ken Coburn

Your love and support mean more than any words I could type here.

Thank you for staying by my side and loving me always.

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ABSTRACT

The youth ministry program at the United Church of Christ in Abington, Massachusetts is outdated and stagnant. Although UCC Abington has made many positive changes in recent years to be sure it remains modern and relevant, it has failed to address its antiquated youth program. This project explores the changing church of the twenty-first century, and the place of young people within it. This project will investigate the practical concerns that make it difficult for young people to be involved in the church, and the spiritual concerns that often cause them to turn away from the church. The project will also delve into what youth desire and what this youth leader desires for the faith development and spiritual wellness of youth at UCC Abington. Through the lens of practical theology, this project proposes a new and different format for a youth program in the church that will give young people the opportunity to understand and practice their faith in the context of their lives.

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Introduction

This project is about youth ministry. It is about the need for, and the creation of a new and different type of ministry with and for youth at the United Church of Christ in Abington, Massachusetts. It is about understanding the joys and challenges facing young people in the UCC Abington community and adapting youth ministry in order to help them understand their faith as integral to their lives. It is about helping the youth at UCC Abington understand their faith, their spirituality, and their discipleship, and what each means for them in their daily living, now and long into the future.

As the pastor of the United Church of Christ in Abington, I have led the youth programs – youth group and confirmation class – for almost a decade. Despite my leadership, the youth program at UCC Abington is outdated. According to Kara Powell and Steven Argue of the Fuller Youth Institute, “Teenagers today in the US are facing life choices that many of us didn’t experience until our midtwenties.” They go on to say that “The onset of puberty...has dropped three years – from age 16 to somewhere between ages 12 and 13.” In addition, Powell and Argue say that there are “cultural and experiential pressures that leave adolescents with too many burdens and too few resources.”¹ The current generation of teenagers at UCC Abington face a significantly different reality than the teenagers of the past, and yet, the youth program we provide for them is fundamentally remarkably similar. This is a problem. Youth group has followed

¹ Kara Powell and Steven Argue, *Growing With: Every Parent’s Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 28.

the same familiar format it has for decades. And while the format is not inherently bad, it does not captivate the attention or meet the spiritual needs of the teenagers at UCC Abington today in quite the same way it did decades ago. The teenagers with whom I currently live and to whom I have ministered, prefer learning that is hands-on, versus traditional learning that happens behind a desk in a classroom. These teenagers want to engage the world around them to understand how their faith affects their world and how their world affects their faith. They want deep conversation about meaningful and relevant topics. They want to learn and serve and worship and engage in ways that are different from youth of the past. They want to be welcomed, understood, heard, and accepted unconditionally, as they endeavor to discern their faith.

This project proposes a new and different youth program that combines the many time-honored and important lessons of youth group and confirmation class into an exciting and unique format that will better meet the needs and interests of UCC Abington's youth, while also inviting them into a deeper personal faith. The United Church of Christ in Abington has a long and rich history that has included shifts and changes in ministry to better suit the times and the community. I believe the new youth program I have written will fit well into UCC Abington's current and future ministry plans and will highlight their history of being an open, flexible, and adaptable church. Through the reading, research, and writing I have done for this project, I believe this program will offer a better way to lead the youth at UCC Abington. The United Church of Christ in Abington has a history of constant willingness to be bold and innovative. I

believe UCC Abington is ready and willing to embrace this new and different youth program as they continue to be innovators for the current and future church.

This project has been a journey of discovery, chronicled in the writing done here. The journey begins in Chapter One with an introduction to the United Church of Christ in Abington. This chapter will feature a synopsis of UCC Abington's history, highlighting the ways in which they have innovated and transformed in positive ways throughout their 310-year history. This history snapshot will conclude with the description of the program of discernment in which the church community participated five years ago. This history will not only help provide background information leading up to the present day, but will ultimately lead to the reason for this project – an antiquated and overlooked youth program.

The journey will continue in Chapter Two with a dive in the specific history of the youth programs – youth group and confirmation class – at UCC Abington. Sharing this piece of UCC Abington's history will complete the synopsis of the church's whole history. Chapter Two will also offer a description of the current youth program at UCC Abington and the positive things about that program.

Chapter Three will look at into the changing church. Generally speaking, I am referring to the mainline protestant church within the United States. Specifically, I will focus on the United Church of Christ as a denomination and the United Church of Christ in Abington, which accurately reflect the mainline protest churches in the U.S. I will look specifically at where the United Church of Christ in Abington fits into the shifts and changes of the church in general. This chapter will highlight the realization that the

church is changing because it must if it is to survive. This is the heart of the argument for a new youth program at UCC Abington: what worked in the past is not working in the present and will not work for the future. The irony I will highlight in Chapter Three is that the United Church of Christ in Abington easily recognized this important fact during a program of discernment, and yet still failed to see how it impacted their youth programs. The conversation about the changing church must include youth and their place in the church of the present and future. From there, I will weave together the history of UCC Abington and its youth, and hope for the present and future of our church's youth.

Taking the information gained in Chapter Three, Chapters Four and Five will take a deeper dive into what it is about the mainline protestant church today that causes UCC Abington's youth to consider leaving the church and faith (Chapter Four) and then what it is the youth are looking for in a church and what the church can do to understand, appreciate, and minister to and with the youth in new ways (Chapter Five).

Chapter Six is a presentation of the program: The Zoi Program. This chapter is divided into two parts. First, I will describe the conceptual framework for the program, including the theological grounding. Second, I will describe the practical framework, adding some broad details about programs.

In Chapter Seven I will discuss the how The Zoi Program will be implemented and evaluated through a method called "The Deming Cycle." This journey would not be possible without a team of people to help make it happen. The implementation and evaluation of The Zoi Program will take place within the context of a team of people

from UCC Abington who will use the Deming Cycle as their basis. The team will use this project as their guide, but will also need to reflect, plan, and adjust the program to fit the needs of today's youth at UCC Abington. This team will be responsible for both implementing and evaluating The Zoi Program.

While this project is focused on the youth program at the United Church of Christ in Abington, I believe that the ideas presented here have potential to help other similar churches across mainline protestant churches in America. The program I propose is specific to UCC Abington, but the concept of doing something new and different, acknowledging the changing church and the spiritual needs of today's teenagers, can be translated to settings in a variety of different churches. I do not expect that this will work for everyone, but I hope and pray that the material presented here will create a spark for other pastors and youth pastors to reflect on their own histories, situations, and ministries, in a way that leads them toward a transformative experience of both program and faith.

Chapter One

Welcome to the United Church of Christ in Abington

Let me begin by introducing you to the United Church of Christ in Abington. In this chapter, I will share with you some of the basic, but important history of this 310-year-old church. I believe it is important to understand the many ways in which this church has shifted, changed, and transformed throughout their rich history, in order to understand why I believe it is possible for this church community to make such a big, bold, and important shift in their youth ministry program. The history of the United Church of Christ in Abington would not be complete without a recounting of their most recent shift, which began in the year 2015 with a program of discernment that changed how they view ministry in the present and how and why they look forward to ministry in the future. All this history will not only help provide more background information leading up to the present day, but will ultimately lead to the reason for this project: an outdated and forgotten youth program.

The United Church of Christ in Abington

The United Church of Christ in Abington is a small, community-oriented church on the south shore of Massachusetts, approximately thirty miles south of Boston. It is a part of the denomination that is its namesake, the United Church of Christ. UCC Abington dates to 1711 and was the church community responsible for the founding of

the town of Abington.² In the early 1700s, in order to establish a town, the founding people needed two things: a map of the land and a pastor. In order to comply with the guidelines of the General Court for proposing a new town, on December 8, 1711, Samuel Brown became the first pastor of what was then named First Parish Church, and would later become the United Church of Christ in Abington. On June 10, 1712, Abington became a town.

Changes naturally took place over the years for First Parish Church and the community adapted to them accordingly. As the number of people increased in the community, there was a need for a larger space in which to meet and worship. A larger building was built in 1751. Another new building was built in 1819, this time due to the creation of a new main road (Route 18) through the town. (It was easier to rebuild the church building than to reroute the road.) The fourth and current building was built in 1849. All four of the buildings were built within one-quarter mile of each other. In addition to building larger buildings to accommodate large numbers of people, in the early 1800s the church split for the same reason. Two new church communities formed, one in the south part of town and one in the east part, while First Parish Church remained in the center of town. These splits were done with bittersweet feelings. Although no one

² The historical information in this section is knowledge I acquired as pastor during the year 2011, which was the church's 300th anniversary celebration year. Our church organist at the time, Mr. Douglas P. Ulwick, is the President of the Historical Society of Old Abington and shared information weekly in worship. Historic records for the church are kept inside the church building, at the Dyer Memorial Library in Abington, and at the Congregational Library in Boston, Massachusetts.

wanted to split the church in three, between the long travel times by horse and carriage and the tight spaces, the split was natural and necessary. The community embraced the change with positive and hopeful spirits.

The next major turning point in the church's history happened in the mid-1900s. In early 1967, the leadership of First Parish Church met with the leadership of the other Congregational Church in town, North Congregational Church, to discuss the possibility of a merger. At some point after the initial conversations by these two churches, leadership from the Methodist Church in West Abington also joined in. On December 18, 1968, the three churches incorporated as the United Church of Christ in Abington. The buildings of North Church and the Methodist Church were sold, and the building of First Parish Church became their home. Despite challenging emotions and grief over the closures of two of the town's faith communities, the new congregation remained focused on ministry in the present and looked forward wholeheartedly to the future.

Today, UCC Abington's church community is one of the oldest in the area. The church community is representative of the wider community, which is primarily working class, and is similar to other churches in the geographic area, both within our denomination and among other similar mainline Protestant churches. Our population is generally younger than most churches of similar likeness around our area. There are two other mainline churches in Abington, one Baptist and one Catholic. Both of those churches are active, but struggling, with aging populations.

I have been the sole pastor of UCC Abington for ten years and am the twenty-ninth settled pastor in their 300-year history. Our staff is small and includes a minister of

music, a secretary, and a sexton who are all employed at less than part-time. The United Church of Christ in Abington has just under one hundred people on their list of active disciples (members)³ with 50-75 worshipping in our building on any given Sunday.

The history of the United Church of Christ in Abington points to the flexibility and openness to change that has been embraced by the community over the many years of their existence. UCC Abington has historically been a progressive and forward-thinking church community. While I am sure that they have not been perfect, some of the larger disagreements within the church community have been over such matters as the speed at which hymns were played, rather than over theological disagreements or over large and important changes that have needed to take place in order to move the community forward. The church's history suggests that the church community has been consistently open to God's call and responsive to the needs of, and changes within its community. From building more efficient buildings, to both splitting into and merging with other church communities at appropriate times, to joining a new, creative, and forward-thinking denomination, UCC Abington has opened its mind and heart to change in many ways.

Following the merger of 1968, UCC Abington would see consistent participation and growth for over two decades, despite the report by David Greenshaw, President of

³ Part of the discernment process the church went through, which I discuss in the next section, included moving from a membership model of church to a discipleship model. Therefore, when we count people, we call them "disciples."

Eden Seminary, that the Church in America has seen a decline in membership at a rate of a minimum of 1% per year since 1961.⁴ Data collected by Pew Research in 2018 and 2019 indicate that “Over the last decade, the share of Americans who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7 percentage points, while the share who say they attend religious services less often (if at all) has risen by the same degree.”⁵ For UCC Abington it took until the mid-1990s before they would see growth and progress slow significantly. Just prior to hiring me as their pastor in 2011, the church leadership had a conversation (of which I would not find out until much later) to decide between closure and making one last ditch effort to survive. They chose the latter. Although I knew about some of the problems of the church when I first began there, the community managed to present a better prospect than reality would show. I attribute this to their consistently positive and hopeful outlook on the future. When I arrived, the church was running both a Nursery School and a Pastoral Counseling Center out of the building, and both organizations were failing and taking the church down with them. The first three years of my tenure were focused on closing these two organizations simply to keep the church alive.

⁴ John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015), 7.

⁵ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America’s changing religious landscape,” Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life October 17, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

Once these closures were complete and the church community had the opportunity to both celebrate these organizations and grieve their closures, they began to realize they needed to think, talk, and pray about the future of their beloved church. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was offering a program to churches who applied and were accepted, called Crossroads Massachusetts.⁶

Crossroads

In 2015, UCC Abington participated in a program of discernment called Crossroads Massachusetts that invited them to make what they called “big, bold decisions” about its future. This program consisted of small group meetings, worship services, prayer, and a lot of important and meaningful discussions about the current state of the church and its future reality. During a time in history when churches were struggling and many were closing their doors, the United Church of Christ in Abington made the deliberate decision, after a long program of careful discernment, to be a church that not only survived, but thrived in ministry. Subsequently, the church re-wrote its vision and mission in order to focus more solidly on God’s call to them now and into the future.

⁶ Crossroads Massachusetts, during the time in which it was used at UCC Abington, was a ministry of the Historic Massachusetts Conference (now a part of the recently formed Southern New England Conference). Crossroads Massachusetts, which is now a part of the Conference’s *Churches Alive* program, was created for churches that found themselves literally at a crossroads, wanting to discern an intentional path toward the future.

The Crossroads Massachusetts discernment program proved to be vitally important to the life of the UCC Abington community for many reasons. It opened the awareness of the members to the need for a focused vision and mission and it helped them to become creative and forward-looking in all aspects of their life together. Since their participation in the program, they have done numerous creative things. They created a program of spiritual wellness in which they have invented new styles of worship. They made a commitment to caring for their community by getting to know the community and participating in events around Abington, as well as participating in mission work that is focused on the immediate community. With the large amount of empty space in the building (due to the closures of the Nursery School and Pastoral Counseling Center) they opened a community thrift shop to meet the needs of the needy in our community. The thrift shop sells items at a deep discount as well as quite often giving items away to those with the most need. In addition to the spiritual, missional, and programmatic aspects of this discernment program, the church was also able to clean up the administrative aspect of their life together and balance its budget for the first time in decades, creating a financially stable organization going into the future. Crossroads Massachusetts proved to be invaluable for our church community in many ways.

The one huge downfall of the Crossroads program was that it *did not* focus any time looking at the programs for children and youth.

Missing Youth Component

As I think about the positive and transformative journey through which Crossroads Massachusetts led our church, I am retrospectively baffled at the lack of discussion about the children and youth programs. I am equally puzzled at myself for not recognizing this at the time. At that point in 2015, the Sunday School and youth programs were functioning moderately well, especially in comparison to the other challenges the church was facing. It is possible that with all the other problems going on, it did not make much sense to focus on the children and youth. At the same time, in retrospect, it does not make much sense that the program would not consider the possibility that the children and youth were a big part of the future of the church community.

In addition to being the sole pastor of the church, I am also the youth program leader, a role that I took on within the first year of my call with UCC Abington. I have help from two lay people in the congregation, one of whom is my husband. Prior to my taking on this role, the church's youth leader was inconsistent and lacked any sense of drive or excitement needed to work with young people. Youth group meetings consisted of sitting together, eating junk food, and chatting about the week. Confirmation class had not existed for several years. The aforementioned youth leader resigned and left the church shortly after my arrival, at which point I took over.

Youth group and confirmation class have persisted throughout the years of my tenure as UCC Abington's senior pastor in relatively traditional form. I have tried a couple unique approaches to both groups that worked to varying degrees, but made no

drastic changes. During the 2018-2019 program year, I led a confirmation class that struggled. Attendance was difficult for them, some dropped out of the class, and I could tell that attention was waning. Youth group that year also had challenges. While the kids still loved youth group, attendance was becoming a challenge due to work and school schedules. I began to recognize then that something needed to change.

The 2019-2020 program year brought with it more challenges for the youth programs of the church, culminating with a year cut short due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic being an issue for meetings, I was finding that the youth and their families alike were only half-heartedly committed to youth programs. If the youth programs fit into the schedule, then great. If not, they seemed to be unconcerned about what was being missed. Associate Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, Kenda Creasy Dean says, "...young people possess no real commitment to or excitement about religious faith. Teenagers tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life."⁷ Although I would argue against Creasy Dean that I do in fact see glimpses of excitement about faith, I would agree that there is a lack of commitment. The youth sincerely seem to love our church and our youth programs, and they speak openly and enthusiastically about their faith. I also find the conversations we have around serious and meaningful topics are profound,

⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

evocative, honest, and open, and their spiritual formation is transformed through these interactions. When the youth are present, they participate fully and genuinely enjoy themselves. But if the opportunity comes up to do something else, something else often wins.

Not once during the Crossroads discernment process did it occur to me or anyone else on the Crossroads Leadership Team that we had missed something and left the children and youth out. Yet, if asked, I would make the sure bet that the Leadership Team would have agreed that the children and youth are a big part of the future of the church community. My prayer for this Doctor of Ministry program is that it will become an opportunity for the United Church of Christ in Abington to recognize, celebrate, and invest in the youth of the church, for today and long into the future.

Now, let me tell you about youth programs of the past at the United Church of Christ in Abington.

Chapter Two

The History of Youth Programs at UCC Abington

In this chapter I will share the history of the youth programs, both youth group and confirmation class, at the United Church of Christ in Abington. It will be important to have a basic understanding of the history of the youth programs to better understand what brought them to where they are today.⁸ This history will complete the summary of the church's history and will give way to what initially led to this project – the changing church, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Youth Group History

Youth group at UCC Abington dates to the 1940s when teenagers in the congregation were involved in the para-church organization Christian Endeavor. Although Christian Endeavor was an outside organization, it was referred to in the church as the earliest form of youth group. In the mid-1950s, the church formed its own youth group, primarily led by the pastor with help from a student minister from Boston University. Once the student graduated and moved on, a married couple from the church led the group, with the pastor stopping in as often as his schedule allowed.

⁸ The history that is presented here has been gathered through the stories shared by parishioners who have been a part of the church long enough to remember and share the history. I am thankful for their willingness to share these stories and histories.

Memories of this first youth group, shared by older members of the church, focus on social events with other youth groups, fundraisers, and occasional field trips. The group was open to all high school teens, even if they or their parents did not go to church. The youth group helped with the fall fair, church suppers, and other church events. Other than some memories of a self-styled worship service for youth on Sunday nights after the meetings and an annual Youth Sunday, there is not much memory of the substance of faith being discussed or practiced in the early days of UCC Abington's youth group.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the youth group at UCC Abington was large and active. The pastor of the church, who was quite young, led the meetings. In addition to playing games and having fun together, the group participated in peace marches, held extensive conversations about race relations, and attended war protests. The youth group agenda seems to have been driven in large part by the pastor's civic and justice concerns at the time.

From the mid-1970s through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the youth group at UCC Abington was lay led with little participation from pastors. The level of involvement, commitment, and care on the part of the leaders varied greatly. At times, there were numerous lay leaders working together to create substantial programming, and at other times the youth group consisted of nothing more than "junk food and talking" according to one former member. In the 1980s there were lay leaders who ostracized the youth by making demands and threats. Although there were some very faithful and caring leaders throughout this time, unbalanced programming and inconsistent leadership over the course of three decades, combined with the fact that the church itself was in a

slow and steady decline, led to the ultimate deterioration of the UCC Abington youth group.

Confirmation Class History

The first confirmation class at the United Church of Christ in Abington was held in the late 1960s. The same pastor who led youth group in the late 1960s and early 1970s also led the church's first confirmation class. The class met weekly and included youth from the community as well as youth from the church. Confirmation class came with strict requirements. It was mandatory that the youth attend worship each week and submit a paper that analyzed the sermon. In addition, written papers were assigned on various other topics. Class discussions focused on a variety of themes including church history, situation ethics, the Vietnam war, sex, and church polity. Prior to being confirmed, students were required to meet with the pastor to discuss their commitment to the church. Although the requirements for Confirmands were strict, there were no arguments: students and parents followed the rules.

Confirmation classes followed a similar pattern all the way into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Classes were primarily led by pastors, although there was help from lay leaders at various times throughout the years. Topics for classes remained fairly consistent, but requirements relaxed over the years. By the mid-1990s art programs had been introduced into the classes, but the requirement to come to church was no longer held. After the turn of the century, the classes dwindled in size until finally classes were

being held only every couple of years as needed according to the age of the youth in the church.

UCC Abington's Current Youth Programs

At the United Church of Christ in Abington, the youth group currently includes nine youth with another couple alumni who sometimes visit with the group. Youth group is functioning moderately well under my leadership. I work diligently to present material in engaging and meaningful ways and my co-leaders and I connect well with the youth. That said, I have felt for many years that the program itself is not well developed, and I have not had the time required to develop it. Youth group is based largely on simply having fun. We do have many meaningful conversations at youth group meetings, and we have done some mission work, but the youth group itself lacks a clear focus and trajectory. The program does not have a specific structure and it is not theologically grounded.

With confirmation class, I have read and tried many of the current existing models, tweaking them slightly to make them unique and engaging. Still, even I have dreaded going to class! When the teacher does not want to go to class, we can be certain the students do not want to go either! In addition, Confirmation class still has an obligatory quality to it. The last time I taught confirmation class, which was over a year ago, I wrote a unique and creative program that was based largely on field trips. It was

enjoyed very much by the student and leaders alike and became the stimulus for the youth ministry program I am proposing for this project.

Youth group and confirmation class have both gone through substantial alterations and changes throughout their years of existence at UCC Abington. The two programs are now often lumped together under the general category of “youth ministry.” There are certainly overlaps in the two programs, although they historically serve distinct purposes. These two programs have the potential to be melded into one, more significant, more holistic, more theologically grounded program for youth that not only gives young people in their teen years a distinct place in the church to explore and grow, but also connects their faith to their whole lives, not just their lives inside the church building.

UCC Youth Program Benefits

The youth program as it currently exists at UCC Abington has some clear and obvious benefits. The youth love meeting together. Youth group meetings are always productive. Meetings begin with games that not only get the kids moving and active, but also teach teamwork skills, independent thinking, and the value of having fun and building friendships. Following games, we share a snack, or communion meal, while we engage in what we call “serious time.” During “serious time” we talk openly about subjects that are poignant for this group of teenagers, such as bullying, ethical decision making, relationships and sexuality, acceptance and love, politics, or anything else that

might be on their minds and hearts. “Serious time” is followed by “Sanctuary time.” During this portion of our meeting, we gather in the darkened church sanctuary, light the Christ candle, and listen to heartfelt and meaningful music. Once the music is over, we sit in the quiet for a few moments before I give a brief, improvised and informal talk, recap the important things we learned and experienced that night, and close in prayer. In addition to meetings, the youth group participates in mission work, sometimes on their own as a group and sometimes with the larger congregation. The group also participates in the life of the church whenever possible, although not usually in an organized way.

The benefits of confirmation class are less visible and obvious to me. Confirmation class has had many different forms over the years I have taught it, mainly because I never feel the programs are as effective as I would like, and I am always trying something different and new. Recently, two of my former students voluntarily repeated confirmation class because they thought the description of the newer iteration of the class sounded better than the class they originally went through. At the end of the class they both decided they were correct! While I am happy that I have been able to make improvements, confirmation class should not be an experiment! That said, the teenagers I have led through confirmation class have often shared with me some of the positive experiences and memories they have of their time as confirmands. The positive experiences shared are almost always related to creative and unique aspects of the various programs, rather than any classroom lecture I have given.

Conclusion

The youth ministry programs at the United Church of Christ have certainly been positive experiences for large numbers of youth who have gone through them, dating back to the 1960s. But the fact that extraordinarily little has changed in six decades in the way the church presents these programs is a problem. What worked in the past, while valuable and meaningful in its time, is not working in the present, and certainly will not work in the future. This statement underscores the paradox of a discernment program that pays no attention to children and youth and leads me to discuss the nature of the changing church and the ways in which the youth programs must change too.

Chapter Three

The Changing Church

In an article he wrote called “Changing Landscape of Ministry,” Don Remick, Bridge Conference Minister for the newly formed (January 2020) Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ says, “We know that the institutional church is not the center of culture or people’s lives as it once was. We know that each new generation is less likely to affiliate with an institutional religion though they may be deeply spiritual.”⁹ Later in the article he talks about “shifts in the landscape,” again pointing out that neither church nor Sundays are central to culture, as there are a multitude of other ways and places for people to find spirituality outside of the church. The article goes on further to consider what can be learned from the “nones” and “dones.”¹⁰ These are important and helpful lists for anyone trying to understand why the institutional church is dying and what we might consider changing in order to keep it alive.

According to Pew Research, the religious group that is growing the fastest in the United States is currently the “nones.”¹¹ Also according to Pew Research, a third of

⁹ “Changing Landscape of Ministry,” Resources for Adaptation and Transformation, Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ, accessed November 5, 2020, www.sneucc.org/changing-landscape-of-ministry.

¹⁰ “Nones” refer to people who identify as not having any church affiliation. “Dones” refer to people who claim to be “done” with church.

adults under the age of 30 are a part of that group. As a pastor, and particularly, a pastor to youth, the information shared by Rev. Remick, as well as the statistics gathered and shared by Pew Research, are frightening. This information causes particular concern for youth in the church, as they grow toward adulthood, and I wonder if the UCC Abington youth will fall into the one third of adults under age 30 who consider themselves as having no religious affiliation, even despite years of church participation.

In this chapter I will look at the connection between UCC Abington of the past, the present, and the future. I will also discuss the place of young people in the church as it changes and shifts toward a new reality, exploring whether the church even matters to youth anymore. Finally, I will take a look back and a look forward, stitching the conversation together in preparation for a deeper look in the next chapter at what the United Church of Christ in Abington needs to think about regarding its youth.

The Past is Not Working in the Present (Nor Will it Work in the Future)

I sometimes hear people of the older generations talk about “the church of the past” when they talk about UCC Abington. They reminisce about the days when the pews were full, people lined up to serve on Boards and Committees, and the church was viewed as not only relevant, but necessary. Today, UCC Abington has far fewer members, and fewer people doing more work than it did in the past. In addition, unlike

¹¹ ““Nones” on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, October 9, 2012, www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/

the days when church was viewed as germane, one popular current perception is that the church in general is outdated and irrelevant. David Kinnaman, president of leading research and communications company Barna Group, says that "...many churchgoers...readily admit that they believe people are tired of church as usual."¹²

The people of UCC Abington recognized this fact in 2015 when they began their journey of discernment. They not only recognized that *they* were tired of church as usual, but they also recognized that if anything was going to change, *they* had to do things differently. Leadership theorist Tod Bolsinger says something similar. He believes there are imperative leadership lessons that Christian congregations need to learn in order to be effective and survive in these changing times. Bolsinger warns against simply "default[ing] to what you know," when it is no longer effective.¹³

The people of UCC Abington look back fondly on the church and the youth programs of the past. But as they learned through the Crossroads Massachusetts discernment program, reminiscing will not and cannot sustain them now nor into the future. The youth programs of the past worked for their particular times in history.

¹² "Five Trends Defining Americans' Relationship to Churches," State of the Church 2020, February 19, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/current-perceptions/>

¹³ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 31.

However, we can see with both youth group and confirmation, as we entered the twenty-first century, the programs began to lose momentum and teenagers began to lose interest.

The reality is that Christianity is no longer the “center of Western cultural life.”¹⁴ As more and more pastors and youth leaders realize that they were not trained to lead dying churches or perform resurrection miracles on youth groups, many are leaving the ministry. The ones who are not leaving are desperately trying to glean new insights from the multitude of books written about the changing nature of the church in the twenty-first century. As the pastor of a small church that was once on the brink of closure, I have read more than my fair share of books about the emergent / innovative / changing church.¹⁵ As the pastor to the youth, I have also skimmed through many of the shallow books about new approaches to youth ministry. The truth is that for pastors in desperate situations, these books offer glimpses of hope that the churches they pastor and the youth

¹⁴ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 11.

¹⁵ The following are some of my favorite books about the changing church:

Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008)

Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2006)

Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Unchartered Territory*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015)

Tim Shapiro with Kara Faris *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017)

John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015)

groups they lead can find new and unique ways to flourish in order to thrive as they once did decades ago. Books with ideas about captivating games and how to attract youth with things like ice cream socials and pizza nights hold some value for what they attempt to accomplish, but they certainly will not solve all the problems of dwindling youth groups, as they sometimes claim. The deeper research and writing done by people such as Kenda Creasy Dean, Kara Powell and her associates at the Fuller Youth Institute, and David Kinnaman, get at the heart of what teenagers want and need and how they feel about faith, church, and spirituality.¹⁶

The people of the United Church of Christ in Abington learned quickly when they began the Crossroads program of discernment in 2015 that the church of the past did not work in the present, and certainly would not work in the future. When faced with the prospect of dying a slow death, stuck in the past, or becoming the church of the future, the disciples of UCC Abington chose the latter. Fortunately, UCC Abington has a creative, innovative, thoughtful, faithful group of disciples (members) working for its best interest. They chose to focus on living into a call from God to step out of the

¹⁶ The following are some of my favorite books about youth ministry:

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Everett Fritz, *The Art of Forming Young Disciples: Why Youth Ministries Aren't Working and What to Do About It* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2018)

David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2011.)

Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies To Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008)

traditional box in which their church sat, and they began to re-create church as they knew it. They chose to become innovators.

Presbyterian Pastor, adjunct professor, and coach Peter Coutts says that, “Innovators are constantly scanning for what they believe will be the next improvement, and they are entrepreneurial in capitalizing on improvement. They love new ideas, can cope with a high degree of uncertainty in adopting a new idea, and are willing to accept the reality that not all ideas pan out as hoped.”¹⁷ This statement is reflective of the current community of UCC Abington. Their time of discernment led them to recognize their creativity as they became a new type of church, giving them energy to make improvements that were not just recreations of the old, but new things altogether, while also recognizing that there may be some trials and some errors. They were willing to step out of the box, and then to break the box down and put it in the recycle bin, so they had plenty of room to learn, explore, and grow in faith, without tripping over old boxes.

None of these changes were easy. There was a small but vocal group who expressed their opposition to innovative change. The people who rose to become transformational leaders during the time of discernment did an amazing job teaching and preaching the message of change that they knew needed to be heard. A couple members left the church during this time, and their departure was grieved. But the leadership knew that members leaving was a risk and a possibility they needed to endure. They knew that

¹⁷ Peter Coutts, *Choosing Change: How to Motivate Churches to Face the Future* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2013), 68-69.

in order to keep moving forward, they were going to have to let go of outdated ideas and the people who espoused them.

The United Church of Christ in Abington, while journeying through the Crossroads discernment program faced many difficult decisions and made many big changes, recognizing that the past was not working in the present. The late Phyllis Tickle, one of the most prominent experts on religion in America, spoke extensively about the radical changes religion and the church have undergone throughout history. These transformations, while at times difficult and challenging, inevitably, each time, led to “a new, more vital form of Christianity...”¹⁸ Tickle, in her work, chronicles the changes, challenges, and growth that the church experiences every 500 years, dating back to the sixth century Fall of the Roman Empire and moving to the Great Schism of the eleventh century, and then to the sixteenth century Reformation. According to Tickle, we are now in the next 500-year transformation. It has been 500 years since the Great Reformation, and we are now immersed in what she calls “The Great Emergence.” Tickle says that “One of the hallmarks of the Church’s semi-millennial rummage sales¹⁹ has always been that when each of the things was over and the dust had died down, Christianity would not only have readjusted itself, but it would also have grown and

¹⁸ Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 17.

¹⁹ Tickle’s use of the term “rummage sale” in reference to the changes the church undergoes every 500 years, originated with The Right Reverend Mark Dyer.

spread.”²⁰ The promise of growth and spread is hopeful for the church in general and for individual emerging churches like UCC Abington, that have taken part in the “semi-millennial rummage sale,” getting rid of that which is no longer useful and re-purposing that which can be given new meaning in new and different ways. Christianity at the United Church of Christ in Abington, despite some pain, grief, and challenge, has seen much growth and renewal.

Except in the youth program.

Youth in the Changing Church

At the United Church of Christ in Abington of the past, youth groups were large and busy, and kids came from all over to attend. Members of UCC Abington who have been actively attending since the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, vividly recall the large numbers of teenagers and detailed organization of youth groups and confirmation classes gone by. They recall big events, church involvement, officers, and even requirements for participation. Now, youth group is small, consisting only of the kids belonging to the few faithful members of the church. This is not a negative judgement; it is simply a fact. Life has shifted and changed since the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Just as the church as a whole faces the popular perception that it is outdated and irrelevant, youth programs face these same perceptions. And just as the church faces the fact that people are tired of the church

²⁰ Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 121.

as usual, youth programs must also ask, “Are youth tired of youth group and confirmation class as usual? Is it time for a proverbial rummage sale?”

“Does the Church Matter?”²¹

A Barna research article states that one of the most pressing concerns for pastors in local churches is “reaching a younger audience.”²² This is a buzz-phrase among pastors who are desperate to grow their churches. It seems that it always comes down to the young people. If we do not get young people into our churches, then they will eventually just die alongside the older generations. But in order to reach a younger audience, what we do in the church must have meaning and relevance to them. It must matter. Kenda Creasy Dean says that “For most of the twentieth century, we studied the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in order to answer the question, “How can we keep young people in the church?” Today, our question is more pressing: “Does the church *matter*?”²³ This question is critical. Reaching teenagers and young people will be impossible if they believe that the church does not matter. For the church to matter to teenagers, it will need to make a difference in their lives. And *if* the church matters, and

²¹ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 9.

²² “What’s on the Minds of America’s Pastors,” Leaders and Pastors in State of the Church 2020, February 3, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/whats_on_mind_americas_pastors.

²³ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 9.

if we can reach today's teenagers with a message of faith, does the faith that is fostered by being a part of a church community influence the lives of youth when they are outside of the church? These are important questions for the church to answer as it considers its future.

Several years ago, I was leading a youth group meeting and was unprepared. No excuses, but for whatever reason, I did not come prepared with a "serious time" discussion. I had games, cookies, juice boxes, and a nice Christian rock song with which to end the night, but I had not given thought to prepare a conversation for discussion. I honestly thought the group would not care. They did. They cared a lot. And they were *not* happy with me! They told me that night that serious time was non-negotiable. They let me know in no uncertain terms that they would rather I skip the games or cookies than not to prepare a discussion for serious time. Serious time, they said, was one of the few places in their lives in which they could say what they really think, express their true feelings, ask hard questions, and still receive unconditional love. They said they felt safe to truly be themselves at youth group, and especially during serious time. Serious time *mattered* to them. Serious time was what connected their life and their faith into one seamless whole.

This story is an important indicator of the importance of relevant and meaningful conversation and engagement for today's adolescents. The story tells me that for the youth of UCC Abington, conversation about important topics in the context of the faith community matters. This story also serves as an indicator of the importance of listening to the youth when they speak about what matters to them, why it matters to them, and

how best to engage them in what matters. As UCC Abington continues to change, adapt, and emerge into its new self, it will be imperative going forward that the youth have an important role and that we listen to them when they speak about what matters and what reaches them.

Conclusion: Looking Back and Looking Forward

It is hard not to feel defeated and tired when reading books and articles about the dying church. It is not hard to feel as if the future is bleak. It is not hard to wonder about other possibilities that life might hold if this pastor gig just does not work out. But then there are glimpses of what could be ahead, hints of a promising future, that are reminiscent of resurrection hope. There are moments that remind us that “lively faith is not located in buildings, programs, organizations, and structures. [But that] spiritual vitality lives in human beings; spiritual vitality is located in the heart of God’s people and the communities they form.”²⁴ That spiritual vitality lives, not only in adults, but in teenage human beings too. Because they too are God’s people. They too are a part of the church community at UCC Abington, and many others like it.

Looking back at the Crossroads discernment program, I am disappointed. Not because the church failed; in fact, the church most certainly succeeded in many spiritual

²⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 6.

and practical ways. I am disappointed that as a community, we failed to see the importance of including our church's teenagers in the process. Disappointed that we did not notice their glaring absence. Disappointed that it did not occur to us that without them, there really could not be much of a future. Looking back, I am baffled that we did not recognize that of all the challenges UCC Abington was facing, the most poignant challenge was that "...young people in America and Europe are leaving the Christian church at an unprecedented rate"²⁵ and what that could potentially mean for UCC Abington if it did not find meaningful ways to reach the teenagers in their community of faith. Going forward we need not only to tend to the games and cookies, but we also need to tend to the spirituality and faith of our youth if the church is ever going to matter to them.

American religion and culture scholar Diana Butler Bass opens her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us* by talking about the disappearance of community churches of the 1960s and the emergence of a new type of worship, faith, spirituality, religion, and church in the 1990s and beyond. One of the reasons she names for this shift is that "...mainline congregations, while they did many worthy things, paid little or no attention to people's spiritual lives. They simply assumed that people were Christians, that they knew how to be, think, and pray like Christians."²⁶ In many ways we assume similarly of

²⁵ Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World* (Naples, FL: Mark Sweeney and Associates, 2019), 31.

²⁶ Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 42.

our youth. If we give them a room in the basement and bake them some cookies and give them a “youth Sunday” once a year, then they will know how to be Christians. This is simply not so. Bass goes on to say that “The primary job of a church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith.”²⁷ I found this statement to be relevant and true for UCC Abington in our discernment and transformation. We made the deliberate decision to turn our focus to our spirituality and faith instead of to our procedures and committees. By focusing on the spiritual lives of our congregation as well as on those of the people in our community, we have found a deeper faith and reason for being. This is a shift we also need to make with our youth.

But is it too late? Have we already lost them?

²⁷ Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 42.

Chapter Four

Have We Lost Them?

I often wonder if it is too late. Has UCC Abington already lost their youth? Or is it possible they still feel a connection to their spirituality and faith? And is it realistic for me to create a program for youth that gives them what they need to connect their faith and spirituality with the world, while also maintaining their connection and involvement with the church? In the first pages of David Kinnaman's book *You Lost Me*, after which the title of this chapter is named, are words like "isolating" "judgmental" and "disconnected," describing how some young people feel about the church. These feelings can lead to disengagement from the church, and as Kinnaman points out, often from faith. Youth state that the church, in many ways, has failed them.²⁸ Kinnaman recognizes that there are both fair and unfair reasons for this sentiment among young people, but regardless, as UCC Abington continues to think transformationally about their current situation and their future, they must understand the sentiment of that failure and what it means for them. Kinnaman says that the church is changing, and that culture is moving and shifting rapidly, and that we must consider how to best "help young people faithfully follow Jesus" amid all these fluctuations.²⁹ The United Church of Christ in Abington has, for several years, recognized the changing and shifting in both the church and in culture

²⁸ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 11.

²⁹ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 12.

and as a result they have made many positive and adaptive changes in the way they lead ministry. Now, it is time to listen to the youth of the church.

I will begin this chapter talking about social changes that have led to both practical and spiritual concerns with the youth ministry at UCC Abington. Following, I will explore what I believe are the most important practical and spiritual concerns for the church to consider as we create a new youth program. These practical and spiritual concerns are some of the common complaints and issues I observe at UCC Abington. These are concerns that, if not addressed, could lead UCC Abington's young people to say that we have lost them. The concerns named here take into consideration UCC Abington's unique history, UCC Abington's youth, and the changing nature of church and society. I will conclude this chapter with some thoughts on the future.

Social Changes

The world is changing rapidly. It can be mind-boggling to keep up with the many new scientific advances, social shifts, and constant innovations within every aspect of life. Maybe every generation feels these changes, but it is certainly just as true now as it has ever been. It is important that youth ministers understand these changes and minister within them.

Pope Francis says,

“Youth ministry, as traditionally organized, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen

patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns, demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand.”³⁰

Of course, Pope Francis is referring to youth ministry in the Catholic church, but when I look at the youth of UCC Abington and think about their counterparts in other similar local churches, I wonder if the same is true. Are young people finding that the church, and youth ministry in particular, are not listening attentively to their concerns and their voices? Even if I feel I am doing a good job, is there something I am missing? Is there more I can or should do?

I have often heard people talk about the need for young youth pastors, citing that it is only young pastors who can connect with teenagers. Apologetics professors Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace say that, “...if we are going to genuinely reach young people, we must have an accurate understanding of what they think, see, and how they feel about the world.”³¹ Reaching young people is less about age than it is about understanding. Any public speaker will tell you that you must know your audience. The same is true for youth ministry leaders: youth leaders must know the teenagers they lead. In addition, what I need to know and understand about the teenagers at the United Church of Christ in Abington is going to be different from what youth leaders in other churches, in other towns might need to understand. While there are certain generalizations that can

³⁰ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no. 105.

³¹ McDowell and Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, 51.

be made about the current generation of teenagers, every youth leader must get to know their particular kids and the social place in which they live and the social pressures and changes to which they must adapt.

Born out of the social changes of the current generation of teenagers at the United Church of Christ in Abington are some practical and spiritual concerns. In the next two sections, I will consider what I believe to be the most critical of the practical and spiritual concerns for the youth and youth program at the United Church of Christ in Abington.

Practical Concerns

I wonder if we have lost our youth on a practical level. I believe that if we do not address each of these practical concerns, we risk losing the youth of our church. If we do not address these issues, our youth may easily choose to go and be elsewhere, because there is no time or desire for church programs that do not enhance their lives.

Lost on the Calendar

Fuller Youth Institute Director Kara Powell and Strategist Steven Argue reveal that in conversations with parents and youth pastors about the biggest struggle that teenagers face, the number one response is *busyness*. They go on to report that the stress

and anxiety level of teenagers is quite high and that parents are often unaware of just how that impacts their adolescents.³²

The teenagers at the United Church of Christ in Abington make the complaint that they are extremely busy quite often. They are pulled in many directions and have many responsibilities. Our young people often tell me that they are encouraged to play sports, be involved in clubs and organizations, get good grades in order to compete for scholarships, and maintain relationships with family and friends. In addition, they are trying to explore their own selves to discover who they are, who they are becoming, what they like and dislike, and what they might want to pursue as their life's work.

Speaking from my own experience, my daughters (who are 22, 17, and 16) have a lot to do. After a six-hour day at school for the younger two (and the same was true for my oldest when she was their ages), they have sports practices that generally end around five or six o'clock. Once they eat dinner, they have homework to do. During the off-season for their sports, their after-school hours are filled with extra-curricular school clubs. On the weekends, their time is filled with sports games, more homework, and social activities. In addition, the teenagers with whom I live and the ones to whom I minister in the church also live under the notion that they need to accumulate achievements in high school in order to get into college or to be considered successful.³³

³² Powell and Argue, *Growing With*, 28.

³³ Clearly, life is different these days. Immersed in this Global Pandemic, schedules are quite different. School, at least in the town in which I live, is part-time in-

I wonder what college admissions boards might say about the kid who replaces the long list of “things I did” with a heartfelt statement about what it meant to participate in the life, mission, and ministry of a church community?

Schedules like the ones by which our teenagers live do not leave much time for church, worship, confirmation class, or youth group. Nor do they leave time for simple unstructured rest and relaxation. As a pastor to both the youth and adults in the church, I also feel it is important to consider the role of the parents and caregivers in the lives of our teenagers. Parents and caregivers often feel similar levels of stress and busyness, both for themselves and their children. Often, parents do not know how to cope with or address this issue. Building a youth program that teaches overstressed youth *and their parents* the importance of rest, self-care, and a holistic approach to life and faith is important. Our faith gives examples of this from the creation stories, in which God builds rest into the week, to the Ten Commandments, when God commands rest for the Israelites, to the Gospels, when we see Jesus taking much needed rest from his busy schedule and urging the disciples to do the same. If the notion of rest is important enough to be included in our Biblical text, then we must also see it as important in our day to day lives. A youth program needs to consider the issues of stress, busyness, and the multitude of competing pulls in a teenager’s life.

person learning and part-time remote learning, sports and clubs have been scaled back, and the church is still not meeting in person. Please note that the examples I give in this chapter are to the exclusion of the pandemic; I refer to pre-pandemic life in my examples and stories.

Overlapping Program Content

Another practical concern for the Youth Ministries at UCC Abington, is the overlapping youth programs. I have found that youth group and confirmation class have several similarities. These overlaps became clear during the most recently run confirmation class because those in the youth group were also in the confirmation class; it was the same exact group of teenagers. Many of the topics I covered in youth group meetings at “serious time” and at “sanctuary time,” as well as in team building activities and mission work, were the same or similar to those of confirmation class. Confirmation class does have some topics that are not covered in youth group, such as church history and polity, but I was covering most topics in both classes. These overlaps can cause the youth and their families to wonder if their time is being wasted with duplicate efforts and leading me to wonder if I will lose the youth because they are bored doing the same thing twice.

While the overlapping of content is an issue in and of itself, it raises a similar issue to that which I raised in the “Lost on the Calendar” section – that of the busyness of the youth. In addition to the content overlap, the issue of having the same group of youth in both programs also required me to look at the time commitment I was asking the youth and their families to make. Given the stress, anxiety, and busyness of the teenagers at UCC Abington and their families, is it fair to ask them to commit to two different youth programs that are so similar to one another? I began to wonder if a more unified program for faith development for our youth would be more sensible. The youth at UCC Abington are being pulled in many different directions. Between school, sports, clubs,

and work commitments, the youth hardly have time to spend with friends, which is as important to their development as anything else they do. Recognizing this overlapping content caused me to consider whether it was helping or hurting to expect the youth at UCC Abington to attend two different church related youth ministry groups that had such similar focus. And I do not think it helps.

Outdated Ways of Approaching Youth Ministry

One of the most obvious problems with UCC Abington's youth programs is that it is outdated. The program runs similarly to how it has been running for years, if not decades, with minor changes. Kenda Creasy Dean says that "Most forms of youth ministry were conceived more than a century ago (e.g., Sunday school and youth groups); surely it is unrealistic to expect them to adequately support today's teenagers..."³⁴ While UCC Abington's youth ministries are not quite a century old, they are still timeworn and antiquated from both a practical and a programmatic perspective. But this outdated-ness is also leading to a spiritual problem. We are losing teenagers from the program because we are not meeting their spiritual needs with an outdated program.

One of the most critical questions that needs to be asked by the people of UCC Abington, even of the youth programs I am leading, is, do they meet the needs of our teenagers today? Every generation of teenagers is unique. Certainly, the teenagers who

³⁴ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 35.

engaged in UCC Abington's first confirmation class in the late 1960s faced issues, questions, and longings similar to those of the current generation, but the particulars of their situations are quite different. As life shifts and changes for all people over time, so it also does for adolescents. An effective youth program must take into consideration both the constant and the changing factors for teenagers in every generation.

The questions of whether our youth program at UCC Abington is outdated, and whether it is meeting the needs of our teenagers, are intimately linked. If the program is outdated, it is not likely to sufficiently meet needs. Likewise, if the program is not meeting our teenagers' needs, it may have many problems, but being outdated may likely be one of them. These reciprocal questions, while practical in nature, both give way to the deeper spiritual concerns leading us to potentially lose our youth.

Spiritual Concerns

Everett Fritz, founder and executive director of St. Andrew Missionaries, writes about the basic needs of young people, stating that the reason young people are leaving the Catholic church is because the Church is not meeting their basic needs.³⁵ While Fritz writes from a Catholic perspective about the church, I believe there is some truth to be found here for the United Church of Christ in Abington. Teenagers do have inherent

³⁵ Everett Fritz, *The Art of Forming Young Disciples: Why Youth Ministries Aren't working and What to do about it* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2018), 31.

basic needs. Of the basic needs that Fritz discusses, there are two that are particularly concerning for me when I think about the youth at UCC Abington and the future of youth ministries there. Not meeting these needs is a spiritual concern that the United Church of Christ will have to address as it considers a new youth program.

“The Need to Be Understood”³⁶

Teenagers want desperately to be understood. I see it in my own youth age kids and in the ones to whom I minister at UCC Abington. It is not enough to provide youth group meetings or confirmation classes. No matter how magnificent the program might be, if the leaders are not taking time to get to know the teenagers individually and understanding who they are and what makes them tick, then all we have is a distraction for youth, not a program that ministers to youth. Everett Fritz says, “Too many ministries in parishes approach teens with the intention of teaching them about the Faith without first seek to know them.... Teenagers don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Before you teach them about the Faith, you must earn the right to be heard.”³⁷

³⁶ Fritz, *The Art of Forming Young Disciples*, 32.

³⁷ Fritz, *The Art of Forming Young Disciples*, 34.

The United Church of Christ in Abington community is not large. With only about eight teenagers in the program, it is not overwhelming to think I can get to know each teenager on a personal level. But even with few teenagers, this will take some deliberate effort. As the pastor to the youth, I do not only want to know what sports they play and what television shows they like. I want to ask deep question and have thought-provoking conversations that get to the heart of who they are and what feeds their souls. This is what leads a person – teenager or otherwise – to feel understood.

“The Need for Critical Thinking about Faith and Life”³⁸

The youth at the United Church of Christ in Abington enjoy having deep, meaningful faith-filled conversations. They speak easily and openly with me and with each other. The youth at UCC Abington also love field trips. They love getting out of the church building and exploring the world through the eyes of their faith. The youth at UCC Abington especially love doing both at the same time.

One of the biggest issues I see with traditional youth ministries at UCC Abington is that we spend way too much time in the church building. It is not that the kids do not enjoy spending time in the building, playing games, or even gathered around the table sharing cookies and conversation. And they especially love being in the sanctuary together (particularly in the dark, when the moonlight shines on the large cross at the

³⁸ Fritz, *The Art of Forming Young Disciples*, 37.

front of the sanctuary). But there is something transformational that happens when the group steps out of the building to explore the world through the eyes of their faith. Whether it is a mission event, a team-building event, or an event designed just for fun, field trips bring faith alive for this group of youth. Field trips give the youth the opportunity to think critically about the intersection of faith and life and to speak openly about that intersection, asking important, difficult, heartfelt, and transformational questions.

Conversations around the table are important. Giving youth relaxed time to talk about their questions, joys, concerns, and angst is helpful for them. Conversing with peers and caring adults about doubts, purpose, and the meaning of life and faith is certainly supportive and engaging, and gives the youth a safe place to reflect. But if the youth are not able to connect the conversations and reflections critically with the very real lives they live, and if they are not taught how to practice their faith in their day-to-day lives, then the conversations alone may not be of much use. Imagine trying to learn how to ride a bicycle through conversation alone. It would be nearly impossible. You may fully understand the theory and logistics of how one rides a bicycle, but until you actually do it yourself, you cannot fully grasp the meaning of the instructions. Kenda Creasy Dean says, "...American teenagers are largely...unaware of religion's effects on their daily lives."³⁹ Creasy Dean is making the connection between the faith identity of

³⁹ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 16.

teenagers versus their practice. The National Study of Youth and Religion for which Creasy Dean interviewed teenagers about their faith, discovered that while many American teenagers identify as Christian, very few understand how this faith is put into practice. I see this problem as one of the most important spiritual problems to address as I develop a new youth program: helping youth understand the connection between their spirituality, their faith, and their everyday lives by thinking critically about faith and life.

The Future

The above-named problems all lead to what I would consider the biggest problem for the future of the church, and that is that the youth, once they enter adulthood, often do not stay involved in church communities. Communication consultant David Kinnaman says that often, once they are finished with Sunday School, age out of youth group, and have their confirmation certificate in hand, they disconnect from the church, and often disconnect from their faith altogether. While each young person, if asked, may have a different specific reason for the disconnection from church and faith, there are underlying reasons that are similar across the board. The reasons are related to the youth feeling that their church has not given them the substance they need to help them connect their spirits and their souls and their faith with all their questions and seeking.⁴⁰ The formation of their faith has not been substantial enough to give them what they need to engage the

⁴⁰ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 10.

world in which they live and work and breathe with a deep sense of understanding. If teenagers are not receiving engaging faith formation in their youth, then there is nothing to motivate them to stay in the church. If, however, young people feel that church helps them to form their faith, and they enjoy the experience, then they are more likely to stay a part of the church in order to continue the life-giving and positive faith formation they are experiencing.

I believe the problems with the youth program at UCC Abington need to be understood not only from a programmatic perspective, nor exclusively from a spiritual or theological perspective. The problems are all problems of substance and depth, that if not addressed, will leave little hope that our youth will want or need church, or faith, in the future. Exploring these problems and thinking through creative solutions to better meet the needs of UCC Abington's youth has led me to this moment and the desire to create a program for youth in the church that not only captures their attention, but also gives them the opportunity to explore their faith in the context of their real lives in order that they might continue to integrate faith, church, and life as they enter adulthood.

I believe wholeheartedly that we can find the youth at UCC Abington in a way that keeps them actively and excitedly invested in their faith, spirituality, and church community.

Chapter Five

Can We Find Them?

I believe we *can* find them. By that I mean, I believe we can re-gain the attention of our youth and create an atmosphere in the church in which they can thrive and grow in their faith and spirituality. I believe the church can be a place in which youth want to be involved and active because what they do, see, hear, and experience there feeds their souls. The first step in reaching today's youth is to listen to them. What do they want? What would make them want to be a part of a youth ministry and a church community? What draws their attention? What captures their hearts? What will help bring meaning to their lives? These questions cannot be answered without listening to their voices and their hearts.

In this chapter, based on reading about youth and talking with members of the youth ministry at UCC Abington, I will explore what I believe young people want out of a church or faith community. Following that discussion, I will address my own desires for a youth program at UCC Abington, given what I as the pastor and youth leader feel is important in leading youth. I will conclude with some thoughts about the importance of prioritizing youth ministry for both the youth and the church community.

What Youth Want

In the church building where I serve as pastor, there is an entire closet devoted to youth ministry supplies used to entertain – balloons, cotton balls, straws, and toilet seats,

to name a few. Youth pastor Brian Cosby talks about the entertainment value that youth ministers and even churches, have put on youth ministry. He says that youth leaders spend money on entertainment, hoping to entice youth into the church and into youth ministry. But, as he points out, entertainment alone will not change the life of a teenager.⁴¹ Yet, youth leaders still do it. I am not suggesting the closet needs to be cleaned out; I think there is deep value in playing together, being creative together, and even just being silly together. Many of the games the UCC Abington youth play together – even ones involving toilet seats – engage the youth in important creativity building and teamwork building skills. But when entertainment supersedes faith, mission, and ministry, then there is a problem.

Cosby says that according to the authors of *Sticky Faith*, a youth ministry curriculum developed by the Fuller Youth Institute, post-youth group students reported wanting more time in youth group for deep conversation, mission trips, and service programs.⁴² When I surveyed the older youth at UCC Abington about their desires for youth ministry, they concurred: more time for conversation and more time for service and mission. Games and snacks are great too, they say, but games and snacks are not actually why they come.

⁴¹ Fernando Arzola, Brian Cosby, Ron Hunter, Greg Stier, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2015), 39.

⁴² Arzola, et al., *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century*, 40.

Conversation

“Serious time” is serious business for the UCC Abington youth group. The group not only enjoys the conversations in which we engage during “serious time,” but they will not have youth group without it. The conversations typically focus on aspects of being an adolescent that are important and impactful. We talk about subjects such as bullying, social media influence, relationships (peer, romantic, family, etc.), and decision-making, to name a few. And all our topics are discussed through the lens of faith.

The young people at UCC Abington are constantly in electronic dialog with one another, and I suspect they are typical of many youth. If one of my own kids leaves her phone on the kitchen counter and walks into the other room, I will hear constant buzzes and dings coming out of the phone with notifications of text messages and snap chats. It will not last long though, because it is rare that her phone is away from her for more than a couple minutes. Kara Powell and Steven Argue, both of the Fuller Youth Institute, ask us to keep in mind that despite the seemingly constant dialog, “the devices, apps, and social media platforms used by our relationship-hungry kids have become a double-edged sword – simultaneously making them feel both more connected and more alienated.”⁴³ This constant connection can leave young people with mixed up emotions, wondering about others’ perceptions of them, fearing that they will not fit in if their selfie does not look right or they are not a part of what is going on in the virtual community. Although

⁴³ Powell and Argue, *Growing With*, 30.

many of the youth with whom I live and work are in many ways connected more than ever, their connections are often shallow, leaving them missing deeper, more meaningful dialog and conversation.

The youth with whom I live and work have expressed a desire for in-person, unstructured, genuine conversation with each other, guided by an adult who will affirm, corroborate, and keep the conversation focused. As much as teenagers cannot seem to live without their phones in hand, I believe they also have a profound and often unfilled need for human contact, deep conversation and dialogue, affirmation, and challenge. I recently drove to a restaurant with my youngest daughter, who is sixteen years old. We talked about politics, relationships, school in the age of COVID-19, and what she might like to study in college, all in one short trip! When we arrived, she asked if we could do that more often. Drive in the car to someplace mundane? No, talk. Converse. Dialogue about meaningful and important topics. This car ride was a reminder to me of how sacred the moments of conversation in youth group meetings are, and that although they may not let on, teenagers carry these sacred conversations with them in their everyday lives.

In her book *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean talks about “Conversational Faith.” In giving our youth opportunities to converse with one another, we must also give them opportunity to talk about their faith. The conversations we have at youth group meetings during “serious time” always include a faith element. There are two reasons this faith element is always included: First, the kids know they are in a church and so therefore feel comfortable bringing faith into the conversation; and second, if it does not

come up naturally, I bring it up. According to Creasy Dean, "...families and communities that encourage practices in which teenagers must put religious convictions and experiences into words are more likely to have highly devoted teenagers."⁴⁴ I would add that teens who put their faith into words also *feel* that faith on a deeper and more significant level. Talking about it makes it easier to understand. In the same way that talking to my daughter about the main cause of the American Revolution helps her to understand it more deeply than just reading about it in her history book, talking about faith and spirituality helps teens understand it on a more personal and far deeper level than simply reading books and listening to sermons.

Mission / Service

Similar to the way putting faith into words helps teens grasp and claim it more deeply, so too does participating in mission and service. If I brought a guest speaker to youth group to discuss homelessness, the kids would surely learn a lot and engage with the speaker. If I ask the same group of kids to make sandwiches and put together brown bag lunches and then drive to the homeless shelter with me so that we can give them to homeless people, and then talk about what they saw and experienced there, and then say a prayer for the homeless, they will learn even more about homelessness. In the second scenario, the youth will have seen with their own eyes and listened with their own ears to the homeless community. They will have worked with their own hands to provide

⁴⁴ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 135.

sustenance for a hungry person. They will have felt with their own heart the gratitude that pours forth from the homeless community. Then, they will begin to understand their own place in the incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ. They will begin to feel what it means to simply be with another human for a moment of their journey and to offer unconditional, non-judgmental, divine love to another human being.

This type of incarnational ministry can happen when Christians participate in caring for other human beings, as Jesus asked us to do. Although the Fuller Youth Institute reports that youth desire more “mission *trips*,”⁴⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean argues that “mission is not a trip,” but mission is “the business that congregations are in.”⁴⁶ I would argue that youth do not necessarily need “trips” to participate in mission and ministry. Creasy Dean describes an “incarnational view of mission,” saying it is “the human translation of divine action in the world.”⁴⁷ There are many places and many ways this “divine action” can take place through youth. Sure, a trip might be one. But there are many opportunities for mission, service, and ministry in one’s own proverbial back yard. The above story of ministry to the homeless is one example. There are homeless people in our community; no long trip needed to find them or minister to them. So, while

⁴⁵ Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 111.

⁴⁶ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 97.

⁴⁷ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 97.

mission trips may be valuable in and of themselves, ministry and mission can be embodied by a community of youth without even leaving town, allowing the youth to see and understand their surroundings and their neighbors in a real and tangible way. In this scenario, the mission and ministry in which they participate is in the current reality of their community, their everyday lives. This intersection – of faith, ministry, and life – is important.

Comfort

“Comfortable. Our church is comfortable. I feel at home there. I’m accepted for who I am. People are friendly and caring and not like in a superficial way. That’s how I think church should be.”

Caroline, age 17, describing how she feels at her church

There is a lot about the teenage world that is anything but comfortable. Teenagers work hard to be perfect, to fit in, and to never lose their cool, lest they be judged, even though they are likely already being judged by their peers for something. And being judged is uncomfortable. In the world of today’s youth, acceptance is conditional; caring happens only under certain circumstances; and comfort is rare. When I asked the youth group about the qualities they would like to see in a new youth program, they named the very qualities that are missing in other places of their life and world: acceptance, care, and comfort. Acceptance and care, they say, are what makes the church comfortable.

Directors of the Fuller Youth Institute, Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin name “Fuel a Warm Community” as one of six strategies to help young people

discover and love church.⁴⁸ They maintain that the church does not need more programs, but rather, it needs warmth.⁴⁹ Some of the words they use to describe churches that exude warmth are welcoming, accepting, authentic, and caring.⁵⁰ And that makes these churches places of comfort. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin also say that churches often put too much focus on programming and not enough on warmth. Churches can get caught up in keeping busy, so much so, that they forget what it means to connect with each other. I will admit this is a hard mentality to embrace. There is a sense of competition among churches as to who can create the best programs. Even our denomination puts churches in the “spotlight” for the unique programs they create.⁵¹ But a church that focuses more

⁴⁸ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, chapter five.

⁴⁹ The Fuller Youth Institute leaders use of the word “warmth” is an accurate representation of what I mean when I write “comfort.” I chose to use the word comfort because it was one shared with me by my own youth group, and in fact, my own daughter as a member of the youth group. Please note that by comfort, what I do *not* mean is complacency regarding issues that need rigorous conversation and review, critical thought, and imperative action. The comfort about which the youth speak is one that is characterized by warmth, and gives opportunity for them to speak openly and honestly, even about difficult and challenging issues, without fear of ridicule. It is a comfort that gives them the opportunity to be uncomfortable with certain topics and conversations in order to open the door to spiritual growth.

⁵⁰ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 166.

⁵¹ The Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ has a section on their website under “News” called “Spotlight.” “Spotlight” highlights special church ministry projects that are unique and creative. “Spotlight” is meant to be positive and uplifting, highlighting the wonderful work that churches are doing to minister in the name of Jesus Christ. I have submitted stories several times to have UCC Abington’s ministry highlighted, yet we have never been chosen to be in the “spotlight.” I admit that it feels as though there is a competition for the most unique and creative ministry, and as

on programs than on acceptance, welcome, authenticity, care, and comfort, has missed the mark. And the youth will notice.

...

Conversation, mission / service, and comfort are three non-negotiable characteristics for the youth program at UCC Abington, according to the teenagers who attend. Wrapped up in those characteristics are others such as acceptance and care. The youth at UCC Abington want a safe, warm, welcoming place to call their church. As a pastor, I want these same things for them. Young people are not concerned about fancy programs, ornate worship, or even hip music. They are interested in a place where they can be who they are, express how they feel, discover their faith, and know that there is no judgement.

I want to provide for them what they want. But there are things I want too.

much as UCC Abington is doing great things, we've never been chosen as worthy of a "spotlight." I know that our ministry *is* worthy, and we need not compare our church to others, but the temptation is certainly there to do just that. I wonder if "spotlight" has missed the mark?

What I Want

According to the University of Rochester Medical Center, teenagers' brains work differently from those of adults. For adults, the processing of information happens in the rational part of the brain (prefrontal cortex). But the rational part of the brain is not fully developed until a person is age twenty-five. For teens then, the processing of information happens in the emotional part of the brain (amygdala). This means that good judgement often goes by the wayside in light of deeply felt emotions.⁵² Given this information about the development of the teenage brain, the formation of a youth program cannot be based solely on what the youth want. While it is crucial to listen to them and incorporate their needs and desires, it is also critical that I have something to say!

Engagement with the World

I want the youth at UCC Abington to understand their faith as a part of their whole life, not just a separate segment of it. I want them to see, feel, and understand how and why their faith guides them on the journey of life and how the journey of life influences and shapes their faith. It is not enough to teach young people in the basement of the church about their faith. We need to engage the world alongside them and help them to see, feel, hear, experience, and understand what it all means. My hope and

⁵² "Understanding the Teen Brain," Health Encyclopedia, University of Rochester Medical Center, accessed October 6, 2020, <http://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=3051>.

prayer are that youth will not only be able to integrate faith into their lives, but will be able to see their faith as an integral part of lives. Youth need and want engagement with the world that is meaningful and relevant. Giving them the opportunity for engagement with the world through the lens of faith development will help them connect their spirits and their souls with their questions, their seeking, and their life.

Programs for youth in the church must give teenagers the tools they need to engage with the world in which they live and work and breathe with a deep sense of faithfulness, connection to others, and connection to God. A youth program should offer a safe, comforting, and loving place in which youth can express doubts and questions, share joys and sorrows, and deepen their faith in a way that helps them to integrate that faith into their everyday lives. A youth program that brings the youth to some of the real, practical places in which they will find themselves throughout life in order to discover the ways in which their faith informs their connections with people and situations will help them to deeply and innately understand the connection their faith has to all of life.

Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace talk about training and deploying in their book *So the Next Generation will Know*. They say that first responders must train so that they will know what to do when they must deploy to a situation in which their help is needed. They compare the training and deploying of first responders to the training and deploying youth leaders do with their teenagers.⁵³ This is along the lines of what I envision for the youth program at UCC Abington. A youth program that trains teenagers

⁵³ McDowell and Wallace, *So the Next Generation will Know*, 141.

to be Christians in the world. Something as simple as going out to the mall, for example, can be done through the lens of faith. If youth have the training to evaluate the moral use of money, the value and necessity of purchases, and sustainable living through the eyes of their faith, then they become people making ethical decisions in their everyday lives. Their faith informs their living. Such important lessons taught in adolescence have potential to positively impact decisions and actions for an entire lifetime.

Biblical Understanding

I want the youth at UCC Abington to have a basic understanding about the Bible. They do not need to be Bible scholars, but they ought to understand the story, the history, and the message. There is a perception among youth that the Bible is irrelevant, outdated, and even problematic. There may be problems that are difficult to decipher in the Bible, but the problems are not all there are to the Holy Scriptures. John Dorhauer, General Minister of the United Church of Christ, writes about the problem in his book *Beyond Resistance*. The following paragraph, when I read it, captured my very thoughts about how to make sense of a teenager's thoughts on the Bible –

What postmodern mind believes what the Bible has to say about homosexuality? About slavery? About the role of women in the Church, culture, and the family? How many awkward sermons do preachers have to deliver on the sacrifice of Isaac, on Jesus calling the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog, or on Joshua being told to enter towns and slaughter all the men, women, children, and livestock in the name of God? Who is going to submit the limits of their belief structure and morality to a Levitical and Deuteronomic code that asks us not to wear shirts

woven from two fabrics and to stone a woman raped inside the gates of the city who fails to cry out for help?⁵⁴

It is true. What person, what teenager, is going to believe these stories and laws and accept them as fact and truth? And what message are we giving our youth if we tell them to do so without the opportunity to think, reflect, dissect, process, and understand for themselves? And what's more important than all the dissection and uncomfortable Levitical code, is the redemptive message of Jesus' love. It is the power of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection to transform attitudes, actions, and entire lives. While I most certainly feel our youth ought to have a grasp of Biblical knowledge, I believe they need to understand the transformational love of Christ deeply in their hearts, regardless of specific thoughts about precise historic details written in the scriptures.

Within that claim, youth also need to be challenged to make changes in their lives based on their understanding of Jesus' unconditional love and forgiveness. There is plenty in the scriptures that can prompt these challenges. These challenges can in turn motivate youth to action. According to Griffin, Powell, and Mulder, many young people report that one of the reasons they love their church is because "their church inspires them to act."⁵⁵ The challenge and inspiration to act is not something teenagers shy away

⁵⁴ Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance*, 72.

⁵⁵ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 143.

from, but something they appreciate and enjoy. Giving teenagers the knowledgebase they need about the Bible, and the opportunity to openly question and even criticize what is written there, can help them to open their hearts and minds to what the scriptures can offer them, and the ways in which the scriptures can motivate them to action, even in a world full of questions.

Spiritual Wellness

Spiritual Wellness is a term used in the vision and mission statement of the United Church of Christ in Abington. During the Crossroads discernment program, as we developed our new vision and mission, we discerned that spiritual wellness was an important part of our vision and mission as a faithful Christian church community. Spiritual wellness for UCC Abington is about caring for one's own spirit and soul by engaging in spiritual practices. By taking care of our own spirits and souls we feel we are better able to care for others.

I want the youth at UCC Abington to understand what it means for them to be spiritually well, and how to develop their spiritual wellness. In the same way humans strive to be physically well and emotionally well, we need also to strive for spiritual wellness. Being spiritually well is an important part of what we believe it means to be faithful Christians. Taking care of our own spiritual life is critical to faith development. But our own spiritual wellness is something that is easy to neglect.

Today's families are overscheduled and overstressed. Today's teenagers are so busy with school, work, and relationships, there is not much time for anything else. Every teenager I know reports that they have some level of anxiety, ranging from moderate to severe. Teaching kids to care for their own spirituality is more crucial now than it has ever been. Giving youth a place of their own within the church community, to develop their spiritual wellness is essential.

The youth program I have created puts an intentional focus on teaching teenagers about spiritual wellness and helping them explore ways in which they can tend to their own spirits and souls. The program gives opportunity for the youth to learn about and develop such practices as prayer, meditation, worship, sabbath, fasting, mindfulness, and walking in nature, to name a few.

Family Care

Parental involvement in a teenager's life is critical. It is also a very delicate balance. Teenagers want and need their parents to be involved in their lives. But adolescents also desperately want to discover their own identity, separate from their parents. Teenagers learn from their parents even as they protest everything their parents say, think, and believe. When it comes to faith, spirituality, and religion, parents have the opportunity to provide a solid foundation, while also giving their teenager the space to ask questions, make challenges, and explore spirituality. But they cannot do it alone.

According to Barna Research, most parents (85%) understand that it is their obligation to teach their kids about faith and spirituality.⁵⁶ The study also finds that despite recognizing this responsibility, they rarely do it. And although parents do see teaching kids about faith as their responsibility, they are content to let the church actually do it. As a pastor, I believe the church does have a responsibility to teach children about faith and spirituality. But at the United Church of Christ in Abington, we only see our children and youth for a couple hours a week at best. I believe there is opportunity for joint effort between parents and the church. It would be ideal for parents to work together with the church to teach children and youth about faith. It would also be ideal for the church to support and encourage parents in their parenting in general, and specifically the ways in which parents can support, encourage, and enhance the spiritual development of their children.

The youth program I envision for the United Church of Christ in Abington supports and encourages parents and families they walk the faith journey together. Brad Griffin, Kara Powell, and Jake Mulder of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary state that, “It’s impossible to prioritize young people well without also prioritizing their families.”⁵⁷ Young people are a part of a family system and we must

⁵⁶ “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development but Struggle with Effectiveness,” Barna Research, May 6, 2003, barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/.

⁵⁷ Griffin, Powell, and Mulder, *Growing With*, 203.

pay attention to that system, also nurturing and supporting the system, if faith formation is to be meaningful and effective.

Supply and Demand

One of the important findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, a study done on adolescent spirituality from 2003-2005 says that “Supply and demand matters to the spiritual lives of teenagers.”⁵⁸ This finding indicates that youth are likely to participate in programs in the church when the church makes ministry to youth a priority. Historically, youth group has been a remote ministry of the church, set apart from both ministry and worship of the adults in the church. This has been called “The One-Eared Mickey Mouse Model of Youth Ministry,” a term coined by Stuart Cummings-Bond in the late 1980s. Cummings-Bond said, “Churches with strong youth programs have usually controlled adolescence by corralling it, by institutionalizing it – and not within the daily rhythm of the church, but outside of it, in a smaller circle that is tangent to the larger one, like a one-eared Mickey Mouse.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, 201-205 (Appendix B).

⁵⁹ Stuart Cummings-Bond, “The One-Eared Mickey Mouse,” *Youthworker* 6 (Fall 1989): 76.

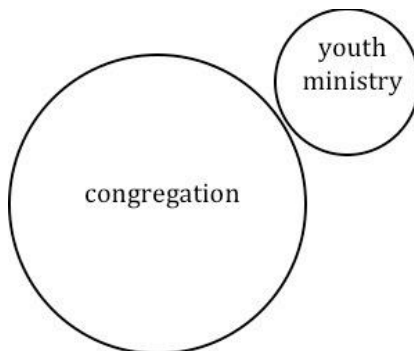


Figure 1

UCC Abington has until recently followed suit with this tradition and “corralled” their youth outside of the congregation. I do not believe the people of UCC Abington did this intentionally or with any specific reasoning. It seems that was the norm for how churches and youth groups functioned together and so they followed suit. Although the youth group’s life together reflected life in the “adult” church, it was still separate. Youth participate in mission work, listen to spiritual/religious talks, converse around Christian themes, pray together, and build relationships with one another – all things that the adult congregation does. But they did it distinctly isolated from the rest of the congregation. They did not participate in mission, ministry, or worship with those younger than they are or those older. When adolescents became young adults and were no longer eligible for youth group, they often left the church because they did not know how to exist in a church full of adults. They had spent their entire lives being segregated from the congregation as a whole and put into age-appropriate groups led by adults. Once they become young adults themselves, they did not know what to do. They were left to their own devices and they did not know what devices worked.

In recent years, UCC Abington has made deliberate attempts to bring all ages our community together in ministry and worship. We have created new and innovative styles of worship that create opportunities for deep communion and hands-on mission work. These creative worship services include all generations. On the Sundays when we hold these worship services the Sunday School age kids and the youth meet together with the congregation. During traditional worship services, when the children and youth are not in worship, I often share stories with the congregation about outings, games, or mission work in which the youth have engaged. Adults in the congregation consistently tell me how much they love hearing these stories. So much so, that the adults in the congregation requested that I lead youth group meetings for them! In these “Youth Group for Adults” meetings, the youth lead the adults through a typical meeting. Youth Group for Adults started out as just a silly event, but turned into an incredible opportunity for adults and youth to get to know and understand one another. Holding this type of intentional intergenerational event tells the youth that they are a part of the community, not just a lone off-shoot of it. It also tells the adults the same about adolescents, that they are a part of the community, not separate from it.

Programs that intentionally create space for adults and adolescents to minister and worship together let people know that youth and programs involving youth are a priority. Then, as adolescents become young adults they feel connected to the church community in a way that allows them to naturally become participating adults in the life of the church community.

Chapter Six

The Zoi Program

A Program for Youth at the UCC Abington

In this chapter I will outline the program I have designed for the youth at the United Church of Christ in Abington called The Zoi Program. The name comes from the Greek word Zoi, which means “life.”⁶⁰ The program is based on the idea that life and faith are intertwined and cannot be separated. This program takes into account UCC Abington’s unique history, as well as their current situation, given the prayerful and faithful work they accomplished through the Crossroads discernment process. The program considers the benefits of the existing youth program while also considering the changing church, the significance of the church to the youth, and the ways in which the church has inadvertently forgotten the youth in the past. To create this program, I had to consider the many practical and spiritual concerns named by the youth in our church, as well as their hopes, dreams, and desires for a new youth program. I also had to consider my own hopes, dreams, and desires for youth in the church today. As the pastor to all generations of people at UCC Abington, I needed to think about and consider the entire community and not segregate or silo the youth, but integrate them into the life of the whole church, while also respecting their specific need for separate space.

⁶⁰ Warren Baker, ed., *Hebrew -Greek Key Word Study Bible: Bringing the Original Text to Life, English Standard Version* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2013), 2143.

Creating this program has required research in a number of very different areas. First and foremost, I had to understand the history and traditions of the United Church of Christ in Abington, many of which I was already familiar. Talking about this history with the people of the church who remember it was quite helpful in gaining personal perspectives as well as some basic history. This oral history also helped me to understand the nature of the changing church more deeply over the years. Hearing the oral history, coupled with reading authors such as Phyllis Tickle, Tod Bolsinger, and Dorothy Bass, who have all written extensively about the nature of the changing church, has helped me to understand how and why churches are changing and what modern day parishioners need to do about it.

Creating this program also required research about youth and youth programs. Much of what I needed to know about the youth programs at UCC Abington, I learned from my own first-hand experience as the youth pastor. The history of youth programs at UCC Abington, I learned through talking with some of the parishioners who lived it, either as youth or as youth leaders throughout the years. It was also helpful to read authors who have written about youth and youth programs in order to make connections with the youth to whom I minister. Authors such as Chap Clark, David Kinnaman, Kara Powell, Andrew Root, and Kenda Creasy Dean have helped me to understand the history of youth programs and what youth think about them, as well as to understand modern youth programs, and accordingly, what youth think of those too.

The most significant part of the research was understanding the concerns, questions, problems, hopes, and dreams of the youth themselves in regard to the church

and youth programs. This knowledge came in large part from reading generalities about youth by some of the above-named authors, in conjunction with my own first-hand knowledge of the youth to whom I have ministered. Much time was spent reflecting on my own experience as a pastor to youth and coordinator of youth programs. As I came to understand the concerns, questions, hopes, and dreams of the youth, I was also able to identify a theology that defines the approach of youth to faith and the church.

The outline I present in this chapter is in two parts. The first part is the conceptual framework. This part includes the reason for moving from two programs (confirmation class and youth group) to one program (The Zoi Program), and the theological grounding of the program. The second part is the practical framework. This part includes some basic details of how the program is organized, but is prefaced with an introduction to the first step in implementing the program: forming a leadership team.

Conceptual Framework

The youth program I have created for the United Church of Christ in Abington, called The Zoi Program, is unique, innovative, and new. The program is designed to enhance the spiritual formation of youth in a way that considers the lifestyles of today's teenagers and their families. The Zoi Program aims to integrate youth into the church, to work with the youth and their families to develop spiritual wellness, engage in ministry, and to relate faith and life together for youth. The program allows youth to engage in a variety of activities, field trips, and events to enhance their spirituality, their faith, and

their relationships with each other and with God, in a way that is not burdensome or taxing, but uplifting and energizing. The program also gives youth the opportunity to encounter their church and in a way that is relevant in today's world and encourages a life-long connection to their faith.

One Program, Not Two

Considering the need for change and adaptation in the church, this new program eliminates the need for two separate programs – confirmation class and youth group. The new program is one program. One of the first things that will need to be addressed with the youth and their parents is the unique nature of this program. It will be foreign to people who have known the long used traditional youth group/confirmation class model of youth ministry. It will be important to educate families so that they understand that the many time-honored lessons of traditional youth group and confirmation class will be covered, but in a distinctive and sustainable way leading to a greater depth of spirituality and faith.

The Zoi Program is designed so that youth can participate in a variety of events that take place over the six-year time frame during which they are adolescents (ages thirteen to eighteen).⁶¹ Every year is unique in terms of the particular events, but topics are covered on an ongoing basis. Over the period of these six years, youth have

⁶¹ Although participation *can* begin as early as age thirteen, teenagers can join the program at any point.

opportunities to participate in the program in a way that is most helpful for their faith development and formation. There is a strong connection between all events and the overall goals of the program, yet each event within the program can stand alone. Think about it like signing up for a gym membership. The overall goal is to get healthy and strong, but there are a variety of different ways this might be achieved. For some, lifting weights will help, for others walking on the treadmill, and still others might benefit more from group classes. For most, it is a combination of machines, weights, and classes might work best to achieve overall health. Just as gym memberships come with personal trainers to help tailor a program to your needs, so the Zoi Program gives youth the opportunity to meet with adult leaders to talk about particular spiritual needs, concerns, and interests in order to best tailor a program for each individual youth. The Zoi Program allows the youth to be in the program and participate in what is meaningful for them. This flexibility allows youth to participate as they are able without feeling as though they are missing something if they are unavailable for a particular event – they know that the event they missed, or something similar, will come around again in their time in the program. This flexibility also allows youth to engage specific programs of interest at particularly helpful times in their faith development. Each youth will have an adult leader to guide them through the program and help them discern what programs will be most helpful for their spiritual development. This flexibility is ideal for today's youth and their families, and will help to increase the joy and excitement youth and their families feel about participating in events without a sense of obligation or duty.

Theological Grounding

I share the following story and reflection.

After teaching my first confirmation class as the senior pastor at the United Church of Christ in Abington, I realized that the program was not working well. I taught several other classes in the years that followed, each time trying to make them more interesting and more engaging. I tried several different curricula that included cartoon video clips, arts and crafts, journaling, and reflecting. I even tried cobbling together different curricula to create my own “best of” confirmation program. The beginning of each class would hold such promise. As the program wore on, I would notice that kids were bored, disinterested, and disengaged. They did their best, as did I, to feign interest. But the reality was that something was not working.

Youth group was better. Games and cookies added to the mix helped hold the interest of the kids. But they seemed to enjoy the more thoughtful parts of youth group meetings, looking forward to “serious time” conversation about real life issues, and “sanctuary time” to sit together prayerfully while listening to heartfelt music and reflecting in the still of the evening. Even so, there was a sense that something was missing.

Then one day I tried something that felt radical. I was inspired by the book *12 Days Out with God: A Hands-On Guide to Rediscovering God* by Chris Gidney and Mike Elcome. The book is devotional in nature, taking the reader on field trips to discover

places in which we find God.⁶² I wondered if field trips could be a more effective way of teaching teenagers about faith and helping them to deepen their faith. I decided to try it. I took the group of teenagers (that year it was the same group of teens in both confirmation class and youth group) to the Derby Street Shoppes – an upscale outdoor shopping plaza – just a few weeks before Christmas. We were not there to find new clothes or the latest tech gadgets; we were not there to search for the perfect gift for a special someone. We were there to find Jesus and to explore and understand our faith. We surveyed stores examining price versus quality, searching for the meaning of life, and looking to find even a hint of faith in the fancy Christmas decorations. We sat on a bench and watched the hustle and bustle as we reflected on the moral use of money and what Jesus might think about the Shoppes. We pondered how our faith informs the way we spend money, how the gifts we might buy for friends hold meaning, and how we take care of ourselves and each other. The kids were engaged and excited. They shared thoughts, emotions, hopes, and faith. At one point, we chatted kindly with a woman who was cleaning the sidewalk. She was wondering what we were doing and so we told her. She was delighted. As she walked away, the kids spoke openly about disparate wages and why and how much they valued the cleaning lady's service. Then, they wondered out loud as to whether Jesus might have been speaking to them through this kind woman. Following these conversations, we went on a desperate search for Christmas decorations that had anything to do with Jesus, finding extraordinarily little, and lamenting at this

⁶² Chris Gidney and Mike Elcome, *12 Days Out with God: A Hands-On Guide to Rediscovering God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

discovery. It was the most engaging and meaningful class I had ever taught. It was innovative and unique. It was real. It brought the kids to an actual place where they frequently go – and would likely continue going throughout their lives – in order to examine how their faith informs their decisions and how their decisions inform their faith. They loved it, and so did I.

What made this field trip so special? What was it about this adventure that led this group of kids to share their thoughts and questions so openly about Jesus and life and faith? While I knew it was not anything magical, I knew that there was something different, and I needed to figure it out. What kind of theology was happening here that got these kids excited?

What happened that day at the Shoppes was an opportunity given to the youth to explore everyday life through the lens of faith, and faith through the lens of life. It was an opportunity to take the lessons they had retained from Sunday school, youth group, confirmation class, or listening to sermons, and reflect on how it applied to life in a practical and meaningful way. Reciprocally, they were able to think more deeply about life and apply it to faith in a way that could potentially lead to deeper faith formation and personal transformation.

This method of theological reflection is pragmatic and hands-on, useful and real. The kind of theology happening was practical theology – albeit not in academic form, but in everyday form. Professor of Pastoral Theology Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore says, “*Practical Theology* is a term commonly used in Christian theology for a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives

of individuals and communities.”⁶³ She goes on to say that practical theology is “associated with action-oriented religious words, such as *formation, transformation, discipleship, witness, ministry, and public mission.*”⁶⁴ As I reflect on the conversations at the Shoppes, I realize that a practical theology that anyone can do was at work without even realizing it. The youth and leaders together were reflecting and conversing in a way that expressed religious beliefs in the context of a commonplace and routine activity. Doing this reflection in this context allowed the teenagers – and the leaders too – to be transformed through the opportunity to look at and think differently about an otherwise ordinary situation. They went home from this experience with a deeper sense of how their faith, spirituality, and religious beliefs informed their lives and their decision.

Practical theology is a solid academic discipline about which much has been written and studied. It is a field of theology that connects academic study “within the diversity of human spiritual and mundane experience, making its home in the complex web of relationships and experiences that form the fabric of all that we know.”⁶⁵ This definition, by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, speaks to the theological and reflective approach to teaching youth to which the Zoi Program aspires. It was out of a desire to

⁶³ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 103.

⁶⁴ Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 103.

⁶⁵ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, second edition*, (London: SCM Press, 2016), 3.

teach youth how to navigate relationships and experiences through the lens of spirituality and faith that the program was conceived. While practical theology is a field far too expansive to literally teach to teenagers, the essence of what practical theology is about is an important aspect of the Zoi Program and had begun to take shape before the program was even fully conceived. Swinton and Mowat say that “Practical theology seeks to explore the complex theological and practical dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on with these situations.”⁶⁶ By this standard, reflecting on the experience at the Shoppes, we were not only exploring the intersection of faith and life, but also contemplating the possibility that a transformation of heart and soul could take place, even while doing something as simple and ordinary as shopping. This is part of what practical theology aims to do and what I hope it will do for the youth to whom I teach and minister. But how does one teach transformation?

I suppose it is impossible to literally teach the type of transformation that can emerge out of learning that happens through the lens of practical theology. Rather, a teacher must be equipped to lead and guide discussion in a way that lends itself to transformational moments. For the teacher, understanding the tasks of practical theology can help guide such conversations. Professor of Mission and Evangelism Richard Osmer

⁶⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, xi.

outlines what he calls “The Core Tasks of Practical Theological Interpretation.”⁶⁷ Osmer states that in many of the situations that congregational leaders face, the four core tasks can serve as a guide for interpretation and response. The four tasks are the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task, and the pragmatic task. Each of these tasks explores an accompanying question: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? These tasks and their guiding questions are certainly helpful in many situations that come up in the context of church leadership. But I also see the value in using these questions as a guide for designing lessons, events, and conversation with the youth for the Zoi Program. Understanding how to reflect theologically using this method of practical theology will give the youth a way to faithfully reflect on various situations in throughout lives. Osmer says that “Wisdom provides a set of steering strategies with which to navigate life.”⁶⁸ My hope for youth who engage in the Zoi Program is that reflecting theologically through the lens of practical theology will help them to develop wisdom with which to navigate life. But what is this wisdom? And how do we learn it?

Dorothy Bass, in her chapter called “Camping” in *Christian Practical Wisdom: What it Is Why it Matters* speaks about “a kind of knowing that is embodied, engaged,

⁶⁷ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2016), 4.

⁶⁸ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 88.

and attuned to God...⁶⁹ The chapter is a personal reflection on a camping trip she took during which her heart and mind were opened to what she calls “the reality of God’s new creation.”⁷⁰ To the unobservant heart, the camping trip may not have seemed extraordinary. Hiking, rolling out blankets, looking at the stars, all seem quite ordinary for a camping trip. But as Bass recalls details about the location of the trip and the people on the trip, she unearths within herself a deeper sense of knowledge – to the earth, to humanity, to God, to herself, and to healing – that is different from informational or data-based knowing. Bass says,

...I retain a certain kind of knowledge of God: I can recite a long-memorized creed or summarize the views of a certain theologian. But the knowing I’m writing about here is not so readily articulated, nor easily lived. ...what I want to depict is a kind of knowing that allows one to recognize God’s grace and healing, active in and for the world, and sometimes also to cooperate with it. Such knowing is not merely mental or even primarily moral, but rather is fueled by desire and carried in the body.⁷¹

This type of “knowing” about which Bass writes is exactly the type of knowing, or wisdom, that the Zoi Program proposes to teach. This chapter helped me to understand

⁶⁹ Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What it Is Why it Matters*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2016), 64.

⁷⁰ Bass, Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Nieman, and Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 64.

⁷¹ Bass, Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Nieman, and Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 69.

that a field trip like the one we took to the Derby Street Shoppes need not be an attempt to demonstrate anything in particular about God or the presence of God, or even faith itself. But rather, the field trip was an attempt to help the youth, through guided conversation and reflection with the group leaders, shape their faith language around their experiences to help them understand its meaning for life. It was an opportunity to open their minds and hearts to the possibility of transformation that would not only be a momentary revelation, but that would lead to a lifetime of reflection, growth, healing, and joy.

I believe that grace is often found in ordinary moments that become extraordinary through conversation or wrestling or reflection or silence or laughter or tears or any other multitude of ways. Learning to live faithfully is learning to open our eyes, ears, minds, hearts, and hands to the possibility of grace and transformation through faith. The field trip I took to the Derby Street Shoppes with the youth became one of those extraordinary moment in which, from what I observed, the grace of God was held close in the hearts of teenagers and reflected upon with respect, honor, and blessing. Then, that ordinary moment became a moment of both learning and transformation. It became a moment in which practical wisdom was learned and embraced. Practical Theologian Christian B. Scharen, in this chapter called “Rocking” in *Christian Practical Wisdom*, talks about learning “the wisdom to hear God’s presence and voice speaking...”⁷² Engaging with

⁷² Bass, Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Nieman, and Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 120.

and embracing this type of practical wisdom takes practice, but it also takes an awareness of grace and an awareness of the divine. This was such a moment at the Derby Street Shoppes; a moment in which a group of teenagers learned and felt what it means to live sacramentally by listening with their hearts for the divine in and around them.

The example of field trip to the Derby Street Shoppes can be adapted and molded to a variety of different situations, lessons, and events to help teach the youth about the spirituality, faith formation, and transformation that are possible through the perspective of this type of theological reflection. This is precisely what my hope in the Zoi Program is grounded: learning and theological reflection that can create transformation. When I look back at the Confirmation classes and youth groups that I, and many before me have led, I see a lack of depth for which I now understand our youth long. They want to engage and be engaged, and they want to serve and be served. And they want what they do and learn at church (whether Sunday school, confirmation class, youth group, worship, or meetings) to matter. They want what they do and learn to have meaning and relevance for all of life, not just life inside the big white building. I believe that using practical theology as a reflection point, the Zoi program can and will teach youth about faith that matters.

Practical Framework

In this section, I will walk through a very basic framework for the program. I will include details about how new teenagers are welcomed into the program, a description of

events, how the program ends each year, and the worship marking when adolescents transition out of the program. But before any of that is possible, the first step is forming a leadership team.

Leadership Team

At the United Church of Christ in Abington, ministry happens in teams. Nothing is created or implemented in a vacuum or by one person alone. Although I developed the idea for The Zoi Program in the form of this Doctor of Ministry project, the development has not been done alone. Years of collaboration and conversation about what works and what does not work in youth ministry have led to this program. To get to this point, I have relied on feedback from leaders, students, and congregation members. Going forward, in order to implement The Zoi Program, a team will need to discuss, reflect, plan, and adjust the program to fit the needs of today's youth at UCC Abington. This team will need to consist of a diverse group from the population of UCC Abington and will absolutely need to include youth from the more recent or current youth groups and confirmation classes. This team will be responsible for both implementing and evaluating The Zoi Program.

I will discuss implementation and evaluation in further depth in Chapter Seven, but before any details of The Zoi Program's practical framework can be understood, it is important to know that the program is being led by a team.

Welcome

Every family will receive a welcome letter prior to the child turning thirteen years old. This letter serves as an introduction to The Zoi Program for Youth and invites the family to a “Welcome Dinner Worship (Appendix A).”⁷³ Sharing in Dinner Worship will allow the youth and their families the opportunity to worship together and get to know one another through fellowship and conversation. Before each course (appetizer, soup/salad, main meal, dessert) the kids and families will be asked to switch seats in order to share communion and conversation with different members of the larger group.

The meal for this worship will be prepared by representatives from various boards and teams within the church along with the youth who are already in the program. Sharing this meal is not only a practical way to give the youth an immediate sense of togetherness with other generations in the congregation, but also an opportunity for them to talk to people from the various boards and teams within the church and to hear about the ministries in which those people participate. During the Welcome Dinner Worship, the “message” will be a personalized welcome with information about the program in general, focusing largely on the conceptual framework and theological grounding as outlined above.

⁷³ Dinner Worship is a special type of worship service during which parishioners’ worship, pray, sing, *and* share a communion meal together. The parishioners at UCC Abington are familiar with this style of worship as we hold “Brunch Worship” once each month.

Events

A variety of events will be offered throughout each program year, including team building experiences, retreats, field trips, church-based events, events that encourage and enhance spiritual wellness, events that provide education, and mission focused events. Each program year will begin with a team building experience. Team building experiences such as ropes courses and retreats can strengthen connections and relationships and help the youth to get to know one another more deeply. These events can also help youth leaders get to know the teenagers, to better minister to them throughout the year. (See Appendix B for sample lesson plans for potential field trips.)

Because part of the goal of the leadership team is to help the congregation understand that youth ministry as a part of the whole church, as opposed to separate from it, the youth will have an important part in the worship and ministries of the church. While they will have worship and ministry that is unique to them, they will also be considered an important and integral part of the whole church. For this reason, the vision and mission of The Zoi Program is the same as that of the church.

The church's vision and mission are based on a practical theological framework that attempts to help the parishioners understand faith in terms of the work, mission, worship, and ministry in which they engage every day. The Zoi Program will encourage participation and reflection on the church's vision and mission with all generations of the

church community together.⁷⁴ For this reason, events will fall into the three categories by which UCC Abington accomplishes its vision and mission.

Spiritual Wellness – This category is about exploring faith and spirituality and their relationship to all of life. Events in this category may include worship (with other generations and with youth only), prayer and meditation, yoga and faith, education, and sabbath, among others. This category includes field trips to everyday frequented places such as a restaurant, a museum, the library, a cemetery and/or funeral home, a park, or a shopping mall. This category also includes field trips that are educational in nature, focusing on church and denominational history. Events in the Spiritual Wellness category might also include yoga classes, guided meditation, or a sabbath retreat. (See Appendix C for a Sabbath Retreat outline.)

Care for Community – This category is about ministry and mission in our local community. UCC Abington has made the deliberate decision to focus ministry on the community of Abington and surrounding towns. Events in this category include working with local food pantries and homeless shelters to provide needed supplies, working with

⁷⁴ The vision of the United Church of Christ in Abington is “To enhance the lives of the people in our community.” The mission is “To connect people to each other and to God.” UCC Abington accomplishes its vision and mission through “spiritual wellness, caring for our community, and friendship and fun.”

the Abington Celebrates Committee.⁷⁵ Here again, the United Church of Christ in Abington's approach to caring for community comes from a practical theological grounding. The church community seeks to understand that faith is intertwined with all of life, including the manner in which we care for our community. Youth and adults in the congregation will work side by side and reflect together about how and why we care for our community.

Friendship and Fun – This category is about just what its name indicates: building friendships and having fun. These events are purely about playing together in order to build relationships. Events in this category might include bowling, mini golfing, or game nights.

Endings

Just as each year begins with a worship service, so too will it end with one. The worship at the end of each year will also be “brunch” or “dinner” style worship. It will be designed and implemented by the youth and will be reflective of all they have learned and the many ways they have grown in faith throughout the year. This worship will also

⁷⁵ Abington Celebrates is a special committee that coordinates community building events for the town several times each year. Events are primarily focused on fun, but also have a community service element embedded in them.

include a time to recognize graduating seniors who will be aging out of the program.

(See Appendix D and Appendix E)

Chapter Seven

Implementation and Evaluation

The Zoi Program Leadership Team

The first step in bringing The Zoi Program to fruition in at UCC Abington will be to form The Zoi Program Leadership Team. The basic purpose of this team will be to develop, implement, and evaluate The Zoi Program. Youth leaders Mike Work and Ginny Olson, in their book *Youth Ministry Management Tools 2.0*, define a team using Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith's definition from *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating High Performance Organizations*, which states, states, "A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they are mutually accountable."⁷⁶ Work and Olson emphasize that "A **strong team** (emphasis theirs) doesn't happen by accident. It takes intentional recruitment, careful screening, discernment of when to say no to certain people and yes to others, and lots of prayer."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Katzenbach and Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High Performance Organization* in Mike Work and Ginny Olson, *Youth Ministry Management Tools 2.0: Everything You Need to Successfully Manager Your Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 253.

⁷⁷ Mike Work and Ginny Olson, *Youth Ministry Management Tools 2.0: Everything You Need to Successfully Manager Your Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 253.

Following this wisdom, The Zoi Program Leadership Team will need to be a group of hand-selected people who feel called to be a part of the development of this program. The team will need to consist of people with interest in and understanding of teenagers, who also feel energized for a ministry of teaching and caring for them. Recruiting this team will require important conversations about the nature of the work and ministry, as well as hearing about the call and desire of the potential team members to participate. It will also be important for this team to make a solid time commitment.

Pastor and Youth group Leader Terry Martinson, in his book *Youth Group Seeds*, talks about the stability and consistency of leadership that young people need. He talks about the importance of building relationships and the time involved and notes that it is hard to properly build relationships when there is no consistency. Martinson says, “Understanding that growing youth groups need consistent leadership, a church that is committed to building a new youth group or revitalizing an existing youth group should seek a leader who will stick with the job for a minimum of three years, and hopefully longer.”⁷⁸ For those invited to join The Zoi Program Leadership Team, a commitment of consistent time and energy will need to be made in order for the call to the team to work well.

Once the Leadership Team is established, using their gifts, they will be responsible for seeing through all phases of The Zoi Program – development,

⁷⁸ Terry O. Martinson, *Youth Group Seeds: A Practical Guide to Growing a Youth Group* (Framingham, MA: Centre Print/Copy, 2011), 17.

implementation, and evaluation. Although the program has been developed through the writing of this project, there will be a sizable amount of refinement and modification that the team will need to do in order to tailor the basic program to each group. Along with the development of the program prior to the start of a given year, the Zoi Program Leadership Team will also need to see through the implementation and evaluation phases, during which they will be working directly with the youth, implementing what they have developed, and evaluating it along the way using The Deming Cycle.

The Deming Cycle

The implementation and evaluation of The Zoi Program will be done using the Deming Cycle.⁷⁹ The Deming Cycle is “a systematic process for gaining valuable learning and knowledge for the continual improvement of a product, process, or service.”⁸⁰ The model is a four-step process for learning-improvement created by W. Edwards Deming. The four steps are as follows:

Plan – Generate ideas about innovation or new methods

Do – Carry out the innovation or new method

⁷⁹ The Deming Cycle is also known as the Deming Wheel or the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) Cycle.

⁸⁰ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

Study – Study the results

Act – Adopt, abandon, or adjust the change

The Deming Cycle is represented in a graphic called the Deming Wheel and it looks like this:



Figure 2

One of the benefits of the Deming Cycle is that it is a process that can be repeated in order to attain the best continued improvement for learning. This process will be a valuable tool for the team as they can repeatedly go around the wheel to improve outcomes. In the next two sections I will describe the process of Implementation and Evaluation through the lens of the Deming cycle, using “Plan and “Do” as implementation tools, and “Study” and “Act” as evaluation tools.

Implementation

1. “Plan”⁸¹

The first step in the Deming Cycle is “plan,” which “involves identifying a goal or purpose, formulating a theory, defining successful metrics and putting a plan into action.”⁸² The starting place for this will be reading this project. In order to create a program or accomplish any type of goal within that creation, the team will need to be clear about the goal, the theory that supports the goal, and the metrics that measure the goal. Part of this evaluation will also include looking at the past, evaluating the existing programs, and identifying the problems. This process is about transformational improvement, so the team must have a sense of what it is trying to improve. In the following sections, I will walk through the sub-steps of the “plan” step and how these sub-steps might play out for The Zoi Program Leadership team.

⁸¹ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

⁸² “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

1a. “Identify a Goal or Purpose”⁸³

The research and writing carried out for this project naturally serves as the first part of the planning stage for The Zoi Program. Through this paper, goals and purpose have been identified – to create a new and innovative program for the United Church of Christ in Abington that will enhance the spiritual formation of youth.

1b. “Formulate a Theory”⁸⁴

Through the research and writing for this project, an intricately linked theory and theology have emerged. The theory is that the faith formation of youth will be enhanced by a program that is based in real life situations. The theology that accompanies that theory is practical theology. Through this theory and theology, learning combined with experience have the potential to create transformational faith in the hearts of the youth.

⁸³ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

⁸⁴ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

1c. “Define Successful Metrics”⁸⁵

The next item of planning for the team to define successful metrics. Senior Director of Strategy at the Fuller Youth Institute Jake Mulder suggests that churches need to develop better metrics for measuring ministry than simple numbers. It really does not matter *how many* teenagers came to the event. What matters is the transformation that took place in the hearts of those who attended. He says, “In an ideal world, we’d know if our efforts contributed to young people trusting and following Jesus wholeheartedly... for the rest of their life. Unfortunately, there’s no way to know for sure until years (or decades) down the road.”⁸⁶ He goes on to say that “defining clear metrics is more about assembling *evidence* than quantifiable facts. In ministry, we will never be able to exhaustively explain the ministry of the Holy Spirit...”⁸⁷ Mulder recommends following the advice of business leadership expert Jim Collins, who says, “What matters is not finding the perfect indicator, but settling upon a *consistent and intelligent* method of

⁸⁵ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>

⁸⁶ Jake Mulder, “Why we’re measuring ministry success the wrong way – and how to fix it,” Fuller Youth Institute, August 11, 2017, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SA0p_nlzFjK1XxLyZTqIKxDMw5eZD_V3/view?usp=s [haringhttps://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/measuring-ministry-success](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/measuring-ministry-success)

⁸⁷ Jake Mulder, “Why we’re measuring ministry success the wrong way – and how to fix it,” Fuller Youth Institute, August 11, 2017, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SA0p_nlzFjK1XxLyZTqIKxDMw5eZD_V3/view?usp=s [haringhttps://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/measuring-ministry-success](https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/measuring-ministry-success)

assessing your output results, and then tracking your trajectory with rigor.”⁸⁸ For the purpose of The Zoi Program

1d. “Put Plan into Action”

Putting the plan into action will require two primary steps. First, the team will need to create a calendar for the first year the program will run. Concurrent will be recruitment. This will be a process of thinking about the disciples in our church and offering opportunity for participation to people we feel are uniquely suited to lead, co-lead, or chaperone various activities. Once these pieces are in place, we can move to “Do.”

2. “Do”⁸⁹

The next step in the Deming Cycle is “Do.” During this step the program itself is implemented. This implementation begins with welcome letters just prior to the start of a new program or school year and would also include creating and detailing the list of events for the year. The “doing” in this step will also include recruiting leaders for each

⁸⁸ Jake Mulder, “Why we’re measuring ministry success the wrong way – and how to fix it,” Fuller Youth Institute, August 11, 2017, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SA0p_nlzFjK1XxLyZTqIKxDMw5eZD_V3/view?usp=sharing<https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/measuring-ministry-success>

⁸⁹ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

event. This phase of implementation would last for a full program year (September through June) with evaluation taking place at various points and by various people.

Evaluation

3. “Study”⁹⁰

Once the program is running, we can immediately begin ongoing evaluation. This evaluation can be done using the next step in the Deming Cycle, which is “study.” During the study step, there is a continual process of evaluation and reflection on the evolution of the program and whether or not we are achieving our goals and purpose. During this step we have the opportunity to celebrate successes as well as identify issues or problems that need attention. Once issues, problems, or opportunities for positive change are identified, we can move to the “act” step of the cycle.

Specific study and evaluation by the various people involved will occur at specific times during the running of the program. The leadership team will need to gather on a regular basis to evaluate feedback from the youth and families participating in the program, as well as from the leaders of the program. We will create surveys to be filled out by youth, families, and leaders following each of the events in the new program. It is possible for the overall program to be a success, but for particular programs to need

⁹⁰ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

adjusting or re-writing. Evaluating each event on its own as the program runs will be helpful for particular events, as well as for the overall evaluation at the end of one year.

The next point at which the program can be evaluated is following the first year of its run. This evaluation will be done by the youth and families who participate in the program, along with the leaders who ran the programs and The Zoi Program Leadership Team. For this evaluation, I would create a specific set of targeted questions about the overall program. This evaluation will happen yearly and can be cumulative until the first group of youth graduate from the program, at which point we can evaluate the overall program.

It will be important that the evaluation which happens throughout the year is also studied. We will need to examine whether or not the results we are finding correspond with our hopes and expectations. If they do not, we will also need to study what went wrong. What can be improved? Is the program worth keeping with adjustments? Or do we need to start over? The answers to these questions will be important in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

4. “Act”⁹¹

The final step of the Deming Cycle is “act.” This step is used for “...integrating the learning generated by the entire process, which can be used to adjust the goal, change methods, reformulate a theory altogether, or broaden the learning – improvement cycle from a small-scale experiment to a larger implementation plan.”⁹² According to Deming himself, as spoken on a video on the Deming website, the Act part of the plan may be to “adopt the change or abandon it or to run through the cycle again with different material or different people.”⁹³ At this point, the team will need to decide if there are changes that need to be made and if so, what is the scale of those changes.

Conclusion

I believe the Deming Cycle will be a crucially important tool for implementing and evaluating The Zoi Program youth program on both a short- and long-term basis. However, the deeper, less statistical, more faith centered changes that I would expect to see from this new program might not be something that can be measured for a long time.

⁹¹ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

⁹² “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

⁹³ “PDSA Cycle,” The W. Edwards Deming Institute, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.

Once the program is up and running, it may take until the current youth are adults before they can be interviewed about the effectiveness of the program and the long-term impact on their faith.

Conclusion

I admit that I was one of those pastors who swore I would never get hooked into also being the youth pastor. In 2011, when I became the pastor of the United Church of Christ in Abington, the youth ministry program was in sad shape and the leader would soon resign. That same year, my oldest daughter was entering High School, and so the problem of not having a youth program – youth group or confirmation class – was very personal. So, I became the youth pastor. It did not take long for me to fall in love with this ministry and wonder what my resistance had been all along. At a time when the obvious answer to the question “who will lead the youth group?” was “the young, female pastor,” I did not want to be stereotyped. Of course, it certainly influenced me that as a mother, I now had a teenage child who was looking forward with eager anticipation to what her new role as a member of the youth program would bring. There was a personal drive here that I cannot deny.

I never set out to be a youth minister. I actually began ministry at what one might call the opposite end of the spectrum: hospice care. Rather than working with those starting out in life, I was working with those in the sunset of life – the dying. Twenty years ago, I thought hospice care would become a life-long ministry for me. It is a longer story than I need to tell here about leaving hospice care, starting a family, and then looking for part-time ministry work only to find myself unexpectedly in a parish position. Years of associate work eventually led to a position as a senior pastor. Although I had helped out with youth ministry in my positions as an associate pastor, I was never in charge, and that was fine with me. In fact, I had turned away from associate positions in

the past that involved youth ministry. It was not until I was called to be the senior pastor of a small church that I found myself drawn to youth ministry.

I have been involved in youth ministry for almost a decade now, but even when I began in the Doctor of Ministry program here at Boston University, I had no intentions of creating a doctoral thesis related to youth ministry. I thought the church needed something more, something bigger, some sort of transformative reformation moment. And I believed that I could discover what exactly would look like. At some point along the way, I wondered why I was here at all, if I was simply going to write another youth program. Then, I realized what God likely knew all along, that the transformative reformation moment that UCC Abington, and likely many other churches needed, is a youth program.

One of my colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Boston University, who is a campus minister, told me that he loves to hear of senior ministers who also lead the youth ministry. He explained that in many places, youth ministry is still seen as extra, or something on the side, for which the senior pastor does not have time or cannot be bothered. He understands adolescence and young adulthood to be the most formative time for faith. As we talked, he pointed out the importance of youth ministry, not only for the youth themselves, but for the current and future church. Now more than ever, I believe he is right. I believe the Zoi Program addresses these issues by engaging the youth in ministry, worship, and mission alongside other generations within the congregation, while also giving them their own unique space to grow and learn.

The world is changing rapidly, and I believe wholeheartedly that the church needs to adapt to these changes if it is to survive. Part of the positive adaptive change that I believe needs to happen in the church is a transformative renovation of youth programs. Through the research and study that I have done for this project, I have created a new, innovative way for youth in the church to learn about spirituality, faith, and mission. My hope is that this program will benefit the youth of the United Church of Christ in Abington by giving them the tools they need to explore their own life and faith in an open, loving, safe place. My further hope is that this program will also benefit other churches, pastors, youth leaders, and especially young people who engage in it. I hope that it can become a prototype for other church leaders who minister to youth, to enable them to create unique programs that engage youth with their faith and their world in ways that are meaningful now and long into the future.

I believe the Zoi Program has the potential to teach and guide the youth at the United Church of Christ in Abington in a way that feeds and connects their faith and their souls for a lifetime. I also believe that using the theological grounding, and the unique paradigm upon which the Zoi Program was created can potentially help countless pastors, youth pastors, and youth rethink and recreate the ways in which it is possible to learn, to grow, and to nurture faith. I believe that opening our minds and our hearts to transformative change will lead to a greater capacity to share God's love with a world that so desperately needs it.

Appendix A – Sample Welcome Letter

[On UCC Abington Letterhead]

Dear _____,

Hooray and Hallelujah! You are almost a teenager! What an exciting time this is for you and your family! (Personalize here – if this child is the first, second, third, etc. teenager in the house)

Your church family is excited for you too! And we hope you will choose to be a part of The Zoi Program for Youth at our church.

This letter is your official invitation to our Welcome Dinner Worship

with warm thoughts, much love, and many prayers,

Rev. Kristy

Appendix B – Sample Lesson plans for Field Trips

Finding God at The Grove **Field Trip to Island Grove in Abington**

Objectives

- To explore the Grove and talk about God's creation
- To explore the "Christmas at the Grove" attractions and talk about Christmas
- To look at the Abolitionist Monument and talk about why our faithful voices are important

Exploring the Grove - *Take a walk over to the pavilion to complete this section. As you walk over, look at your surroundings in nature. Make some observations.*

- God is the creator of our planet and in a setting like the Grove we see a lot of his creations.
- Every season will bring with it different views of the same creation.
- Take note of several natural things you find interesting and/or attractive in the Grove.

Christmas in the Grove - *Check out the Christmas in the Grove attractions*

- Have a little fun with this!
- What observations can you make about Christmas based on what you see?

History in the Grove - *Take a walk over to the Abolitionist Monument*

- The Abolitionist Monument is placed where the speaker's stand once stood at Island Grove. Many famous abolitionist speakers spoke against slavery at Island Grove.
- What does it mean to you that people in your community spoke out in this way?
- Why do you think the people named on this monument spoke their voices?
- God gave you a voice. How do you think you can best use it for good?

Finding God at The Derby Street Shops

Objective

- To understand how our faith impacts the decisions we make about -
 - How we take care of ourselves
 - How much money we spend and where we spend it
 - Generosity and greed

Exploring the Shops

- Walk around Derby Street and get to know the types of stores that are there.
- As you explore the shops, you may choose up to 3 to go into as you answer the following questions.

Taking Care of Ourselves

- Human beings are made up of many different parts - we have bodies, minds, and souls. Look for stores and/or products that are designed for these different parts of you...
 - Product or store made to care for the body
 - Product or store made to care for the mind
 - Product or store made to care for my soul
- What part of you is least cared for at the Derby Street shops?
- Name some ways you take care of your body, mind, and soul...

Jesus in the Shops

- Jesus probably would have shopped for something at some point in his life. There is a story in the Bible about Jesus seeing people in the market buying and selling things in a way that made him angry. He was so angry he started flipping the counters over and dumping products and money all over the floor!
 - What do you think made Jesus so angry?
 - Do you think Jesus would have been angry in the shops you visited?
 - If Jesus was in the shops you visited today, what do you imagine he might have said?

If...

...you had to work in one of these shops, which one would you want to work in and why?
 ...you were to spend money in these stores, where would you spend it (think about your mind, body, and soul)

Good and Evil

- There is generosity and greed all around us. Is it possible to find both here at The Derby Street Shops?
 - Where do you see generosity?
 - Where do you see greed?

Finding God at The Fuller Art Museum

Objective

- To find artwork that represents faith

Exploring the Museum

- We will walk around the Museum together to look at the various exhibits and artwork. As we do, keep your eyes open to find...

A Picture of God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit

- How is God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit portrayed?
- What is the image saying to you?
- How do you imagine God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit to be?

A Picture of Evil

- What type of evil do you see?
- How does this make you feel?
- How would you take a stand against this type of evil?

A Picture of a Landscape or Seascape

- How would you describe this artwork with words?
- How would you describe this artwork with feelings?
- Do you see God in this artwork?

Personal Reflection

- If you could paint a picture or create a sculpture of your life, what would it look like?
- If the painting or sculpture isn't finished, what more would you want added?

Finding God at The Library

Objective

- To understand what reading books and reading the Bible can teach us about life, our world, and ourselves.

People with a Story to Tell - Biography and Autobiography

- Look at books that tell the story of people's lives.
- Pick one that made an impression on you and write down the name of it. (Be prepared to tell why it was interesting to you)...
- Jesus told his followers to go out and be light in a dark world. See if you can find a life story about someone who brought light (or positivity / positive change) into the world. Write down the name here...
- If you wrote your own autobiography what would the title be?

Stories from the Past - History

- Look at books about history.
- What period of history or event from history do you enjoy reading/learning about...
- Much of the Bible has history in it. History about Adam and Eve, Moses, Noah, and Israel. History about Jesus, the disciples, and some of the towns where Christianity began. Which part of Bible history do you find interesting?
- If your life was someday recorded in a history book, what would you want it to say?

Stories from the Imagination - Fiction

- Look at some of the fiction books.
- What titles sound interesting to you?
- Find Harry Potter books.
- Some people say these books go against Christianity. What do you think about that? What do you think God thinks about that?

Power of a Poem - Poetry

- Some people enjoy poetry while others do not. Whether you do or not, take a look at a few poetry books.
- Try to find a poem you like and write down the title here...
- The Bible has some poetry in it. This is from the book of Proverbs.

⁸ Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching;

⁹ for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.

¹⁰ My child, if sinners entice you,
do not consent.

¹¹ If they say, 'Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;

let us wantonly ambush the innocent;
¹² like Sheol let us swallow them alive
and whole, like those who go down to the Pit.
¹³ We shall find all kinds of costly things;
we shall fill our houses with booty.
¹⁴ Throw in your lot among us;
we will all have one purse'—
¹⁵ my child, do not walk in their way,
keep your foot from their paths;
¹⁶ for their feet run to evil,
and they hurry to shed blood.

- What do you think it's about?

Conclusion

- The public library is right here in your town! How can the public library help you to learn more about yourself and your faith?

Finding God at The Depot Restaurant

Objective

- To talk about making good choices
- To talk about why mealtime is important
- To talk about what Jesus had to say about food
- To talk about food and the homeless

Choices

- Who likes food? What's your favorite food? Favorite meal?
- Food has many benefits... how do you benefit from food?
- When you go out to eat (or when you cook at home) how do you decide what to eat? What factors do you consider? (cost, nutrition)
- How do you make other decisions in your life? Good decisions? Is it hard sometimes? (Decisions about friends, decisions about what's right and what's wrong?)
- How does your faith guide you when you make decisions?

Meal time

- Do you have dinner with your family each night?
 - Do you say grace?
 - What is dinnertime like at your house?
- Our world moves fast - we even eat fast - fast food
- Even in a restaurant, we often look at our watch if our order doesn't come out fast enough.
- People used to dress up for dinner and relax for hours together!
- Do you feel like our fast paced world has affected your eating habits?

Jesus and Food/Meals

- The Bible has a lot of stories about food
 - The very first story in the Bible - Adam and Eve and the fruit
 - The very last book of the Bible - Revelation talks about the Great Banquet
- Meals bring people together
- Jesus talks a lot about food and eats a lot with his friends
- Jesus is known to have meals with corrupt politicians, criminals, and even prostitutes
- Jesus said that every time we share a meal together we should remember him
- If Jesus was a guest here, what would you talk to him about?

Jesus and Hungry People

- Matthew 25
 - Jesus once said to some people...
 - I was hungry and you fed me, (collect food for the pantry)
 - I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,

I was homeless and you gave me a room, (Mainspring house)
I was shivering and you gave me clothes, (Thrift Shop)
I was sick and you stopped to visit, (Hospital visits)
I was in prison and you came to me.' (Working for justice)

People said, "What?" We didn't do those things...

He said, "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me."

- How does our church do these things for Jesus?
- Big focus for Jesus was on taking care of others, particularly the hungry and homeless

Bonus

- What would you say to the person who made your meal?

Appendix C - Youth Sabbath Retreat Agenda

Friday

4pm – Leave Church

5-6:30pm – Dinner on the way

Dinnertime conversation 1: Discuss pre-conceived notions of Sabbath

Conversation Starters

- Tell me what you know about Sabbath.
- What do you think about when you hear the word?
- Do you know anyone who practices Sabbath? If so, what do you know about his/her practice?

Dinnertime conversation 2: Discuss the VERY basics of the Jewish faith

Conversation Starters

- Tell me what you know about the Jewish faith.
- Tell me what you know about how our Jewish friends worship.
- Have you ever heard of a Shabbat service?

7-9pm – Visit local Shabbat service

I will arrange for us to visit a Shabbat service, including participating in Oneg Shabbat in order for the Youth to have an opportunity to ask questions and have conversation with the people of the Temple.

9:30-11pm – Settle in at Retreat Center/Discuss observations of the Shabbat Service

Conversation Starters

- Tell me your initial observations about the Temple, the people, and the service.
- Did you feel welcomed? Did you feel like a guest or a participant?
- How was the service similar or different from our Sunday worship?

Discussion about the basics of the Jewish Sabbath

- Once the group shares their observations and has some conversation about the above questions, I will transition to a conversation that specifically discusses the importance of Sabbath and Sabbath practice in the Jewish tradition. I will share the two scripture passages regarding the Sabbath from Exodus and Deuteronomy and will talk about some of the imagery and meaning specifically related to creation and liberation.
- We will also discuss the details around Sabbath practice for our Jewish friends and why and how these practices are important for Christians too. We will talk

about what it means to create Sabbath practices as Christians and the difference between that and co-opting a practice that does not belong to us.

11pm – Lights out. Time for rest.

Saturday

8:30-9:15am – Breakfast

9:30am – Prayer/Overview of the Day

During the morning prayer, we will talk about some of the customs around lighting candles and specific prayers to mark the beginning and ending of Shabbat. I will invite the class to talk about special ways they can mark their Sabbath time in order to make it Holy.

10-11am – Session 1 – Stress, anxiety, and productivity

- Discussion about our daily routines
 - What in them is stressful? What is restful?
- Talk about the negative effects that stress and anxiety can have on a person’s physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being.
- What does it mean to be productive? How do we measure accomplishment in our society? In High School?
 - *After giving the Youth time to answer these questions on their own, I will talk with them about what it means to cease Productivity and Accomplishment, as discussed in Section 2 of Part 1 in Marva Dawn’s book “Keeping the Sabbath Wholly.”⁹⁴*
- Dorothy Bass in “Keeping Sabbath” says, “Those of us who feel time’s pressure have lots of company in this society.”⁹⁵ Do you find this true in High School? Who puts pressure on you to be productive?
- Do you feel that being productive and accumulating accomplishments makes you worthy? If so, worthy of what? If not, what DOES make you worthy?
 - *Now is a good time for worthiness and grace in light of God’s love. I would call attention to Isaiah 43 and God’s words of honor and love to human beings.*
- How can we find balance between productivity and accomplishments *and* Sabbath rest?

⁹⁴ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 17-21.

⁹⁵ Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, Second Edition* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2009), 75.

- *I anticipate a conversation at this point around the imbalance of being stressed, anxious, and over-productive for 6 days a week and then stopping entirely for one day. A discussion about balance and the positive effect that taking Sabbath one day a week can have on our approach and attitude during the rest of the week.⁹⁶*

11:15am-12:15pm – Session 2 – The Practice of Sabbath

- What does it mean to Practice Sabbath?
 - *After asking the Youth their initial thoughts, I would share with them some of elements of a traditional Jewish Shabbat. I would compliment that conversation with one about discovering Spiritual and Sabbath practices that are restful and restorative.*
- Discuss elements of a Sabbath Practice
 - Rest – Questions to Consider
 - What does rest look and feel like?
 - What is the difference between being at rest and being bored?
 - *After allowing the Youth to have this discussion openly, I would also share with them thoughts about the physiological benefits of rest.*
 - Creation – Questions to Consider
 - What is the connection between Sabbath and Creation? *Discuss creation stories and God's rest.*
 - How can we connect with nature during Sabbath rest? Why is this important?
 - *Here, I would talk about connecting with nature itself, but also the idea of giving nature, consumerism, and the world a break by abstaining from particular types of activities that put strain on the environment.*
 - What are some ways we can contribute to healing the earth through our personal Sabbath?
 - Spirituality (Study)
 - *I will use the word 'study' lightly with the Youth. They have enough to study and learn in school! I believe using this word in relation to Sabbath without deep explanation could turn them away. Instead I will focus on the idea of Spirituality and (as we say in our church) Spiritual Wellness.*
 - Questions to Consider
 - Tell me about your spirituality.

⁹⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 19.

- What does the word spirituality mean to you?
- What do you know / what would you like to learn about spiritual practice?
 - *I will introduce the Youth to a number of types of Spiritual Practices including Art, Music, Meditation, Prayer, and Yoga.*

12:30-1:15pm – Lunch

1:30-2:30pm – Session 3 – Sabbath and the Lord’s Day

- Questions to Consider
 - What does Sabbath have to do with the Lord’s Day (Sunday)?
 - Do you see the connection between Sabbath and the Resurrection of Christ?

2:45-5:15pm - Spiritual Practices

During this time the Youth will be invited to participate in various forms of Spiritual Practice and/or Sabbath Practice.

Station 1 – Exploring Art

Station 2 – Exploring Music

Station 3 – Meditation and Prayer

Station 4 – Yoga

Station 5 – Silent Nature Walk

Station 6 – Rest/Reading in your room

5:30-6:30pm – Dinner

During this meal together, I will talk about Holy Communion in order to make the connection for the Youth between sharing a meal together as a part of Sabbath feasting and the meal Jesus and his friends shared together, which we also share and call Holy Communion. I will likely reference portions of Marva Dawn’s Chapter on “Feasting with Food.”⁹⁷

6:45-8pm – Evening Reflections and Prayer

8-10pm – Quiet time

10pm – Lights out. Time for rest

⁹⁷ Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 180-188.

Sunday**8:30-9:30am – Breakfast****10-12:15am – Worship / Coffee Hour and meeting with Pastor**

I will arrange for us to visit a Worship service at a local church after which we can also participate in Coffee Hour in order for the Youth to have an opportunity to ask questions and have conversation with the people of the Church about what Sabbath and the Lord's Day means to them.

12:30-1:15pm – Lunch**1:30-4:30pm – Sabbath time**

Time to explore Spiritual practices, go for a walk in nature, or simply rest.

5pm – Head home

Appendix D – Sample Letter to Graduating Seniors

Dear Graduating Seniors and families,

You did it! Hooray and Hallelujah! What an incredible journey you've been on these past few years! You've worked hard, studied hard, played hard, and prayed hard! And now you're getting ready to graduate and move on to new adventures!

We are grateful to God that you have been a part of The Zoi Program Youth program here at the United Church of Christ in Abington. We've learned so much and grown in faith together through this program. We've also had a lot of fun! We are so excited for what the future holds for you!

[Info regarding final worship]

This is a very exciting, once in a lifetime event! So bring your camera! I encourage you to take pictures during and after worship.

With warm thoughts and many prayers,

Rev. Kristy and The Zoi Program Leadership Team

Appendix E – Sample End of Year Letter

Dear Youth and Families,

We've come to the end of another program year here at the United Church of Christ in Abington. The Zoi Program Youth program had a great year! We've learned a lot, had some laughs, and grew as Christians in the process. We've got a great group of teens and we are so proud of them!

[Highlights of the year]

Our worship celebration to close the program year will be [date]. At this celebration we will worship, share a meal, and reflect on all the learning and growth that has taken place this year. This is an exciting day for us, so I hope and pray you'll be able to attend.

With warm thoughts and many prayers,

Rev. Kristy and The Zoi Program Leadership Team

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