

Cultivating audacity: Why do youth ministry?

by [Chanon Ross](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

Riding a bus full of rowdy, screaming teenagers can be hazardous and should be attempted only by trained professionals. Since I am a youth pastor, I am often blessed with this ministry opportunity, which usually involves walking through the bus to keep the conversation to a dull roar. But although accompanying the 50 eighth-graders in our confirmation program can be challenging, I usually learn something about my students in the process. Sometimes I discover how much they don't know.

I was a little surprised when on one of these trips a student stopped me (a male Presbyterian) in the aisle and asked, "Why did you decide to become a priestess?" When all I could manage was a blank look, my young friend tried again: "When did you ask God into your heart or graduate from pastor's school or whatever?"

"Are those supposed to be the same question?" I finally replied.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess so." At this point our conversation had caught the attention of his peers. They were visibly amused, but their laughter did not stop him. He was determined to get an answer to a question he didn't know how to ask. Finally, he abandoned all attempts at religious parlance, looked me in the eye and tried once more. "Why do you do this?" I looked around at the crowd of boisterous teenagers. Why *do* I do this?

Although a dazzling array of youth ministry literature is dedicated to encouraging youth pastors with the latest trends and techniques in youth ministry, we still suffer from a high rate of burnout. Many of us become disillusioned and decide to move on and not look back. When I find myself struggling with this question (usually on Monday mornings), I reread key sections of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

Augustine reveals every sordid detail of his youth, including his excessive partying, sexual revelry and an endless search for the admiration of others. He took a

concubine and impregnated her; despite the urging of his Christian mother, he never married her. His mother prayed for him, but he chose to imitate his pagan father's search for success. When his bacchanalian lifestyle left him dissatisfied, he joined the Manichaeans in a search for God but was eventually frustrated by dead-end questions.

Only with the guidance of Ambrose—the wiser, older and theologically sophisticated bishop of Milan—did Augustine's questions finally lead his heart to rest in God. In other words, the greatest theologian in Western Christianity spent much of his youth bumbling around, taking unhealthy, dissatisfying stabs at life before finally finding someone who could help him ask the right questions. I am in youth ministry because my students need me the way Augustine needed Ambrose.

I sat down next to my young friend on the bus. The laughter and snickering stopped as his peers realized that I was taking his question seriously. "When you were a baby," I said, "your parents brought you before the whole congregation to be baptized. On that day, we made a promise to you and to God." His eyes were wide with attention. "We promised to take care of you, and we promised to believe in you, to raise you and to teach you who you are and *whose* you are. Maybe your question is not 'Why do I do this?' but 'Why do we do this?'"

A few minutes later the bus arrived at its destination on the South Side of Chicago, and these teenagers from the upscale suburbs found themselves in a neighborhood that was nothing like their own. Their rowdy self-confidence turned to self-consciousness as they entered a predominantly African-American church for Sunday morning service. Fifty young white faces stared wide-eyed as a gospel choir rocked the house. There was a sermon, followed by more singing, three full-immersion baptisms, more singing, communion and still more singing. Two hours later, the pastor blessed everyone and we headed to the fellowship hall for food and hospitality. Over the past four years, more than 175 of our confirmation students have had this experience, and every year they ask emphatically, "Why can't we do church like that?" Good question.

On the other hand, mere imitation is not the answer to engaging teens with vital Christian faith. I can think of nothing sillier than our overwhelmingly Anglo, mainline Presbyterian congregation trying to imitate our African-American sister church in order to get teens interested in faith. Robust Christian community cannot be imitated; it is cultivated and nurtured organically. Yet when those of us in youth

ministry feel desperate, we tend to think that the right method, technique, musical style or program will “get kids interested.” Instead of asking “How do we do youth ministry?” we change the question to “How can youth ministry be relevant to youth culture?” If teenagers do not find the Apostles’ Creed intrinsically interesting, for example, we determine to find a way of *making* it interesting to them.

This emphasis on relevance, however, is deceiving and even dangerous. If the youth like the music, they may attend worship more often, and thereby make everyone feel rewarded, but their attendance and our happiness do not necessarily mean that they have received the message. It does not mean that they pray, read scripture or have set out on the journey of following Jesus. Let’s rethink this question of relevance. Maybe youth ministry is not about whether we understand youth culture adequately, but about whether we have fully grasped the mind-blowing implications of Christian belief.

During a review of the Apostles’ Creed, I asked my confirmation students to name key moments in the biblical story of salvation, which they did with relative ease: creation, the Exodus, Abraham, Noah, David and Goliath, and so on. They needed a little prompting on certain elements, such as the exile. Eventually they came to the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As I began to reiterate the centrality of Jesus’ resurrection in the Apostles’ Creed, a hand shot up in the back of the room, and a 14-year-old girl asked, “Are you really saying that Jesus died and came back to life?” I returned her look of astonishment. I was amazed that she had managed eight months of confirmation classes without grasping this central Christian teaching. One of her peers laughed aloud, threw his hands in the air and said, “Where have you been?”

Suddenly I realized the nature of her question. Of course she knew about Jesus’ resurrection; she had attended years of Sunday school and Easter services. She knew this fact the way she knows that the earth is round, that it circles a star called sun, that it exists in the solar system with other planets. But it was as if she had suddenly seen the fact of Jesus’ resurrection through a powerful theological telescope that allowed her to glimpse the grandeur of the universe; for the first time she saw the wonder of it—Jesus came back from the dead! It seemed impossible, yet there it was, written audaciously in the creed.

To say the Apostles’ Creed is to imagine the unimaginable. We not only hope for the impossible—“the resurrection of the body”—we *expect* it and look forward

confidently to its realization. The scriptures are equally imaginative and audacious. They teach us that God came to us as an impoverished, first-century Jew and that this man, Jesus, is the second Person of the Trinity. (The Trinity is another exercise in imagining the impossible.) As Christians we understand ourselves to be in the image of a Being who created the vast expanse of the universe by simply speaking it into existence. Let any of us try to wrap our imaginations around that! But if the creeds and scriptures express the core of Christian faith, imagination and audacity are at the heart of Christian practice. We can neither teach nor practice our faith without them. Thankfully, teens excel at both.

The key to vital youth ministry is not relevance to youth culture. The search for relevance shrinks our theological imaginations and domesticates God's big story of salvation to fit neatly within our lives as they already are. The key is, instead, to find ways to reinvestigate and reexplore our fundamental beliefs so that students can glimpse the truths of Christian faith. Like my confirmation student, we need to have our imaginations kindled by the audacity of the story that God is playing out in the world. God's salvation story is anything but boring, and the implications can even be frightening. Teens may find themselves on a mission trip to some place that's less than safe; they may find their last dollar going to someone who needs it more; they may realize that God will stop at nothing until their time, energy and future have been baptized in the power of God's good grace.

"Drop your nets, leave everything you have, come and follow me," said Jesus to the young fishermen. "I will teach you to fish for people." He reframed the question of their lives, challenging his new followers to invest their time, energy and imagination in an audacious ministry because he had something to teach them. So do I, and so do you. It takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a church to raise a teenager.