

Hearts and minds: Youth are seeking a faith worth dying for

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Will our children have faith? Christian educator John Westerhoff asked that question over 25 years ago in a book with that title. It a question worth asking repeatedly, for the church is always only one generation away from extinction. Are mainline churches winning the hearts and minds of their youth? Or do they serve as a revolving door, with youth exiting either into faithless secularism or “hotter” forms of religiosity, from evangelicalism to Orthodoxy to New Age spirituality?

Bob McCarty, executive director of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, says that Westerhoff’s question needs to be turned on its head: not will our children have faith, but will our faith have children? Youth, McCarty claims, are very much interested in God, Christ and Christianity, but they’re not drawn toward institutional expressions of it.

Some mainline seminaries are appropriately giving renewed attention to youth ministries—Perkins, Columbia and Princeton, to name just three. Princeton’s Institute for Youth Ministry sponsors two Youth Forums each year that draw hundreds of youth ministers and others who work with youth—people who are concerned about youth and hopeful about the signs of faith and commitment that they see.

Why does the church concern itself about passing on the faith? Is it simply a case of people wanting to reproduce themselves, wanting to see their convictions and commitments reflected in their children? If so, the effort is little more than a spiritual form of cloning.

Princeton professor Kenda Creasy Dean points out that evangelicals have traditionally had a particular motive for youth ministry: they seek the “decisions for Christ,” without which the youth are doomed to hell for eternity. The mainline alternative, says Dean, is sharing an enthusiasm for the Christian gospel, “the greatest story ever told.” Mainliners need to retell that story imaginatively, compellingly and robustly, and embody it in daily living.

The church must reach hearts as well as minds. Yes, critical thought is needed more than ever: youth need to learn how to tell, interpret and apply the Christian story, and how to live as Christians in a consumer society tempted by imperialistic ambitions. But as Presbyterian youth pastor Mark DeVries observes, the mainline mascot might be Mr. Potatohead—all head but no body or heart. Kids want and need a palpable sense of the presence of God in worship and in daily living. Or, as Dean puts it, youth are seeking a faith worth dying for. And so are adults.