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- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

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Dori Baker: Teens behaving strangely

When her teenage daughter and friends began tuning in to the Sunday sermon, prepping for midweek lectionary study and bandying about words such as “eschatology” and “quadrilateral,” a mother realized that something exciting was happening in her congregation.

by [Dori Baker](#)

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“Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other -- things that are really of no consequence -- the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside.”

-- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I’m witnessing a group of teens behaving strangely this Advent: they are reading theology.

They flock to a midweek lectionary study. They ask questions about who can serve communion and why. Instead of texting from the balcony on Sunday mornings, they sit in the front pew, avidly tuned in to the sermon. I’ve seen them exchange knowing glances over words such as “eschatology” and “quadrilateral.”

Would you believe that I heard an otherwise-normal 16-year-old quote Stanley Hauerwas? Just one week later, my own teenage daughter asked me how to spell “Brueggemann.” When my slim volume of Advent readings by Bonhoeffer went missing, I knew where to look.

The image of a group of teens discovering the mysterious excitement that can arise from the serious study of ideas about God lies at the heart of a movement that occurred on seminary campuses in the 1990s. Divinity schools designed summer programs to gather teens attracted to all things theological.

Provide them with substantive teaching and straight-up contact with seminary faculty, the thinking went, and maybe some will discover a call to lives of deep, sustaining faith. Perhaps some might become the next generation of passionate, imaginative leaders -- ordained and lay -- the church so

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desperately needs. Several of those programs -- such as the ones at Duke, Emory and Claremont -- have been wildly successful for more than a decade. (I worked with the Youth Theological Initiative at Emory.)

Yet those of us involved in shaping these seminary-based programs privately joked that we succeeded in raising a new generation of organic farmers -- the number of which seemed disproportionately high in follow-up tracking of our alumni -- rather than church leaders.

Questions to consider:

- Are church leaders guilty of underestimating young people? With more imagination, what opportunities might we see for our youth?
- What theological giants of the past might the youth you serve be ready to hear from?
- What teachings and practices of your tradition once were radical but have been domesticated? Could investment in youth reawaken the novelty and risk inherent in your tradition? How does tradition inspire and guide innovation?
- Dori Baker points to the crucial intersection of theology and practice, engaging and reflecting. How is that balance struck where you are? Where might you be off-balance?

We empathized with the young farmers. At moments when the church seems cemented in past glories, these awakened young people, steeped in the gospel, gravitate toward serving the common good. The organic farming and slow-food movements, supported by a burgeoning literature in eco-theology, are compelling.

But we had hoped for this and more. We had hoped for a cadre of young pastors, educators and lay leaders -- steeped in the sacraments and versed in the language of youth culture -- who would abide with a new generation of young people, waiting with Advent-like hope for new rounds of unexpected vocations to emerge.

But often teens returned to their local churches excited about their newfound leadership potential, only to find themselves elephants in the room of church-as-usual. Their local congregations, habituated in leadership-from-on-high and schooled in providing answers rather than unearthing deep questions, often did not know what to do with these youth.

Recently, I've seen what happens when deep theological study, an engaging pastor, a community of like-minded teens and a lifetime of Christian practice combine to ignite a peculiar passion within young people.

The group of teens my daughter finds herself among happened to spring up without help from a seminary

program, showing what can happen when a congregation becomes more intentional about meeting teenagers with substance equal to their quest.

My daughter's church youth group until recently specialized solely in the practice of mission. For more than a decade, the group -- supervised by a paid youth minister and dedicated volunteer couple -- has traveled regularly to Washington, D.C., to be in solidarity with the homeless people in the city's parks. Last summer, a group of four college students traveled to Mozambique; one of those four is now discerning a call to seminary.

What has happened most recently was like adding water to a freeze-dried meal. Our United Methodist church was appointed a smart, young pastor who makes the serious study of theology somehow retro-cool. His reverence for the sacrament of Holy Communion elevates it to seem almost risky. His youth-only lectionary study punctuates the week with anticipation. Erin, Dylan, Daniel and Jacob spend time reading Scripture so they'll be ready. I am not making this up.

We may miss it if we blink, but in this historical moment, teenagers are following a theological debate between Rob Bell, to whom they've been endeared through years of Nooma videos, and his more conservative conversation partner Francis Chan. Spurred by Twitter, this debate has teens passing around their Kindles and dog-eared hard copies so they can discuss the pros and cons of each author's stance.

This heightened interest in theology evident in my daughter and her peers may be isolated, and it may be brief and fleeting. But what if it's not? What if it's the beginning of a movement of digital natives experiencing the intoxicating recognition of one's thoughts intersecting with those of a different time and historical context, but with similarly big questions about life, its meaning and one's place in it all?

The teen brain, we are learning, seeks novelty and risk. We fear that our teens will indulge this desire with fast cars and illegal substances. But what if they discover, as Bonhoeffer's life and writings so eloquently remind us, that faith is also risky and novel? In costly ways, it takes us to places and people where we never dreamed we'd be led.

On a recent trip to San Francisco, my daughter (formerly obsessed with Prada) frequently stopped and talked to the homeless people on the street. Making eye contact, stooping to take a hand, she met a silver-bearded man heart-to-heart. I stood at the intersection and watched. An instinct of fear dissolved into amazement as years of youth group formation transformed before my eyes into a life practice.

I know where she and her friends learned to do this, and where they found this hunger for God. But where do they go from here? Who nurtures these verdant seeds in seasons of drought that will surely follow?

If the adolescent brain is cued up for risk and novelty that a deep encounter with the living Christ can provide, the work of placing teens in proximity to those who've walked this path before becomes paramount.

All of a sudden, it matters greatly that my daughter and her peers have access to a young pastor who is passionately engaged and seriously grappling with the tough passages that crop up in the lectionary and the tough days that pop up in life. It matters also that they have a circle of interpretation -- friends of all ages with whom to wade through theological dilemmas as their capacity for critical reasoning deepens. How can we continue this development in these crucial few years before college?

The Old Testament readings from Isaiah this Advent are striking me as heavier than usual. Lament coupled with long spells of waiting and hoping, grounded in an abiding memory of God's embrace -- that's how Bonhoeffer describes the Advent he spent in prison. As I wait this Advent, I feel grateful for recent moments when the door opened for the teenagers in my midst. I'll rely on this memory to ground my trust that it will open again.