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Youth ministry that's more than fun and games

In South Carolina, Clemson UMC has changed its approach to youth ministry, adopting a richer, deeper model aimed at forming young people into devoted disciples.

by [Ken Garfield](#)



Photo courtesy of Clemson UMC

Youth from Clemson UMC take part in some typical activities, such as beach trips. But the focus of the church's youth formation is to invite them to see themselves as part of the narrative of God's redemptive work in creation.

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The youth ministries room at Clemson United Methodist Church in Clemson, S.C., still has an old sofa, the type that teenagers typically occupy on Sunday evenings far and wide across the faith landscape.

But that's one of the few vestiges of the past in a youth ministry working to educate young Christians in a deeper way. Believing that the role of the church is to mold young people into serious students and devoted disciples, the 1,000-member congregation, located a mile from Clemson University, has shifted the focus of its work with youth.

Leading that effort is a Duke Divinity School student who is convinced that his charges are capable of

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GO

more than fun and games.

“It’s about giving students credit for being able to be theologians,” said Jad Taylor, Clemson UMC’s director of youth ministries. “It’s helping students understand their part in this wonderful story.”

Taylor, 26, is part of the first class in the Master of Arts in Christian Practice program, a two-year degree track at Duke Divinity School with an emphasis on educating youth pastors and other lay professional ministers serving local congregations.

Jeff Conklin-Miller, assistant professor of the practice of Christian formation and director of the M.A.C.P. program, said the idea is to share this model of pastoring with youth ministers who aren’t theologically trained so that they, in turn, can help youth understand their role in the broader Christian story.



The old youth ministry model?

Questions to consider:

- In seeking to “overinvest” in the young, how do you balance investing in programs with investing in people who serve youth?
- How well does your church resist the “ghettoization” of young people? How can it foster an intergenerational community?
- What opportunities for theological formation does your congregation or organization provide for lay staff?
- Both the DYA and the M.A.C.P. form Christians in the practices of worship, hospitality and mission. What are the key mindsets, activities and traits in your organization that form both imagination and practice?

Order pepperoni pizzas, update the kids on the ski trip, bring up a sensitive topic like dating, toss out a few applicable Bible verses, then repeat, with a different topic, the following Sunday evening.

The new (actually, quite ancient) model that [M.A.C.P.](#) is teaching Taylor and the 25 other students in the program?

“What is the Christian church about?” Conklin-Miller said. “What is discipleship? What is baptism? This is an invitation for youth to see themselves as part of the narrative of God’s redemptive work in creation.

“Suddenly, they have a different way of thinking about what it means to be youth in the church. What’s most important in youth ministry isn’t someone who’s, quote unquote, good with kids but someone who is deeply committed to the church’s ministry of formation.”

Insights from the Youth Academy

The M.A.C.P. program and the vision of youth ministry that it seeks to foster draws heavily on insights gleaned by the Divinity School over 12 years of operating the Duke Youth Academy.

There, each summer, high school students and counselors gather on the Duke campus for two weeks of worship, classes and dialogue aimed at helping youth appreciate their role in the Christian story. Launched with a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., the youth academy embodies the philosophy at the heart of the M.A.C.P. program. The academy’s vision statement puts it this way:

“Authentic Christian communities do not isolate or ghettoize youth in a hodgepodge of lock-ins and pool parties. Instead they welcome youth into their very center as they seek to embody faithful life and worship before God.

“The same graceful means that have sustained God’s people historically -- worship, sacrament, serious study of scripture and theology, prayer, service with the poor, hospitality, self-denial, spiritual direction and accountability -- are what youth hunger for today.”

In this spirit, Conklin-Miller said, the youth of the church belong in the sanctuary pews on Sunday mornings, and not on those old sofas in the youth room.

At [Clemson United Methodist Church](#), the young people in the youth ministry sit up front in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, just below the pulpit, said the Rev. Keith Ray, the church’s senior

pastor.

“It means they are integrated into the whole of the congregation,” he said. “It’s one of the things we value at Clemson. We feel the youth learn a lot by being with the older folks, and the older folks learn a lot from them.”

Taylor, a native of Columbia, S.C., graduated from Clemson in 2008 with a Bachelor of Science degree in biosystems engineering. The son of an optometrist and a nurse, he was planning on becoming an eye doctor like his father -- until the first summer he spent as a counselor at a Christian camp in Colorado changed everything. There in the Rocky Mountains, he fell in love with the idea of shaping youth and being shaped by youth.

“I felt like my gifts and talents and passions were all being used,” he said. “That’s a hard feeling to shake.”

The spring of his senior year, a few weeks before graduation, the Rev. Lane Glaze, director of the Clemson Wesley Foundation and campus minister for Clemson UMC, told him that the church was looking for a youth pastor.

‘Where I need to be’

That very moment Taylor told himself, “That’s where I need to be.”

After another summer at the camp in Colorado, he went to work at the church, in August 2008, and started in the M.A.C.P. program three years later, intent on infusing his passion with scholarship. Clemson United Methodist is paying his way in return for Taylor’s commitment that he’ll remain there for at least three years after he graduates this summer, until 2016.

This is how a self-confessed “crazy-haired” youth pastor has come to devote himself to Clemson UMC youth in grades 6-12. With his bluejeans and sandals and a mop of curly hair, Taylor looks the part. Conklin-Miller talked about Taylor’s outgoing personality and how he ends his emails with “Much love.”

The kids at Clemson United Methodist clearly embrace him. Charles Withington, 16, mentioned the fall retreat when the entire youth group came together to explore God’s story in some out-of-the-box ways. To express the joy of Palm Sunday, they danced. To ponder Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, they spent time quietly in a garden. At night, they gazed at the stars.

Whether at a retreat or the Sunday night gathering, or whenever he needs someone to talk to, Charles always knows where to turn.

“I can tell Jad anything,” he said.

Another Clemson youth, 18-year-old Hunter Smith, offered similar praise.

“Jad is really accepting of any person he comes into contact with,” he said. “To me, his faith is overwhelming.”

His ever-present smile notwithstanding, youth ministry is serious business for Taylor. On a rainy evening, the final Sunday before Lent, his upbeat purposefulness came across in a gathering devoted to Jesus’ 40 days in the desert and what that means to teens navigating life in the complicated 21st century.

Following a dinner of red beans and rice, church member and New Orleans native Jill Evans talked about Mardi Gras traditions as the youth devoured a king cake, the colorful pastry identified with pre-Lenten revelry. Several teenagers then read aloud the story from Matthew 4:1-11, how Jesus rejected the temptations of the devil and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights.

Jesus’ wilderness experience, Taylor told the youth as they fiddled with their Mardi Gras beads, reminds us that we are not alone, no matter the temptations and pitfalls we face. He shared what he called his own desert experience, the death of his grandmother and having to see his mother suffer.

“The deserts we’re going through, Jesus has been there,” he said. “It’s OK for us to enter into deserts

together.”

Later, in small groups, the high school boys talked about what they could give up for Lent. Some suggested video games and speeding.

Taylor again gently turned the conversation inward. Our earthly pursuits, he suggested aloud, turn us into something we're not. They hide what's really in our souls. By giving up something, during Lent and beyond, perhaps we reveal our vulnerabilities in a way that strengthens us.

“Weakness is not uncool,” he told the high school boys before the group of 35 came back together to sing a final praise and worship song. “Being vulnerable is good.”

Intense at the DYA

The M.A.C.P. program combines intensive, on-campus seminars and Web-based distance learning that allows the students to remain in full-time youth ministry in their home churches. One of the most intense of those intensive on-campus sessions happens at the Duke Youth Academy each summer.

During two weeks in June, 45 rising high school juniors and seniors from across the nation unite at Duke to worship, pray, serve, and share meals and conversation. The students participate in service projects, hear faculty speakers from Duke Divinity School and meet daily in small reflection groups. It is all meant to inspire teens to take a fresh look at God, the church and themselves.

The experience must be compelling, since youth flock to the DYA, even with the 7:30 a.m. wake-up call each day.

The M.A.C.P. students also attend the youth academy, but not as “campers,” counselors or other staff.

“We are intentional about that,” Conklin-Miller said. “They are ‘participant-observers’ and members of the worshipping-learning-serving community of DYA.”

Last summer, Taylor and two youth from Clemson UMC were part of the youth academy.

Raven Howard, 18, a senior at Daniel High School in Central, S.C., remembers focusing on the story of God as seen through the five *C*'s -- Creation, Covenant, Christ, Church and Coming Reign.

“You learn a lot about how the story of God relates to our story,” he said. “I think it *is* our story.”

Howard loved how they were encouraged to view the youth academy's daily communion as a thanksgiving dinner filled with conversation and laughter. Less laugh-producing was the worship service his group was asked to plan.

“It was interesting but kind of stressful,” he said.

Through it all, Howard said, Taylor was there, just as he is each Sunday evening, stirring conversation, listening and, most of all, accepting.

“Jad doesn't force what he thinks on people,” Howard said.

‘What ministry will it be?’

What's next?

Taylor is committed to Clemson UMC through 2016. Knowing that part of his vocation is working with teenagers, he's thinking through whether or not to seek ordination. The M.A.C.P. would qualify him to seek ordination as a deacon in the UMC, but he would have to go back to school and get an M.Div. to pursue ordination as an elder.

“The entire question of ordination is new and still unfolding for me,” he said. “Five years ago, I did not suspect that I would be working in a local church, much less considering a call to lifelong, full-time parish ministry.”

For now, Taylor is content to walk beside youth as he works toward his M.A.C.P. degree online and on campus. He frames his future around a question that Fred Edie, the youth academy's founding director and now an associate professor of the practice of Christian education, likes to share at the academy, where he still serves as a faculty adviser.

"The question is not, 'Will it be ministry?'" says Edie, "but, 'What ministry will it be?'"

"His words stay at the front of my heart, mind and soul each and every day," Taylor said.

Editor's Note: The deadline for applications for the incoming cohort of [M.A.C.P.](#) students is March 15 and the deadline for the [Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation](#) is March 1.