



The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Building Bridges

Introduction

We cross bridges all the time in everyday life. They get us over obstacles, whether river, valley, road, or railroad tracks. Some bridges are as simple as a plank or log laid down over a stream by a child. Others are feats of strength and grace, with high suspension structures bridging the waters of a bay or the steep expanse of a canyon.

All of us in ministry are about the business of constructing bridges. We build bridges between youth and adults, between the youth group and the congregation, between the church and the community. We build bridges across cultural and racial divides, bridges of reconciliation, bridges of healing and hope. Like those we cross by foot or car, some are simple and others seem like impossible feats of engineering and balance. The good news is that the support for all the bridges we build in ministry is the cross of Jesus Christ. We build these bridges not by our own strength and ingenuity, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those of us engaged in youth ministry help young people cross over from childhood faith to adult faith, bridge the generational gap to welcome youth into the church, and walk alongside youth as they build their own bridges across cultural and racial boundaries. The 2003 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore the dynamics of building bridges in ministry.

Robert C. Dykstra suggests that adolescence is a necessarily lonely time of life and that those of us in youth ministry should not be too eager to herd the youth of the church into groups. We all know young people who are loners, on the margins of the fun and camaraderie of youth group, and we are often pressured to bridge the gap to these youth by inviting them to join the crowd. Dykstra instead affirms the importance of solitude in adolescence as the point from where a young person can learn to love, to think, to speak, and to listen for God's call. The task of the youth minister, says Dykstra, is to provide a safe space for adolescents to discern God's call and to coach them in how to listen.

Dykstra suggests that one way we create such a place for youth is by paying intense attention to the individual young people in our care.

Rodger Nishioka looks at the theological practices of constancy and disruption in youth ministry. If we are hoping to build bridges with young people and to accompany them through the transitions in their lives, says Nishioka, then we are called to practice constancy. Many of us have appropriated misconceptions that youth ministry is supposed to be about “making a difference” and that our work should always feel fulfilling. Nishioka challenges this assumption with a call to stay involved with youth ministry, and with a particular congregation, not because we see impressive results or because we get something out of it, but because it is what we are called to by God. In his second lecture, Nishioka argues that youth ministry should be more concerned with disruption than with protection, for without disruption there is no growth. Our job is not to keep young people as comfortable as possible, but rather to welcome the disruption of the gospel and to accompany young people as they encounter it.

Vivian Nix-Early suggests that the arts are a natural resource for building bridges with and among young people. She discusses the importance of arts as a redemptive vehicle in reconciliation and demonstrates through case studies how groups and individuals are using the arts in mission and ministry. When used for ministry, the arts, persuades Nix-Early, reach to those youth who might never enter a traditional church on their own. Nix-Early explores the role of the arts in bringing about what she terms the NU JERUZ, the kingdom of God here on earth. Her lectures demonstrate the personal, societal, and community transformation that ministry through the arts can bring and give us a blueprint for building bridges through art.

Mark Yaconelli explores the matrix of fear and desire that lies beneath youth ministries. He calls us to build bridges founded on our desire to love youth rather than on our fears about youth. Yaconelli looks to the gospel story of Jesus blessing the children for insight on how we might approach the task of youth ministry. He challenges us to stop our busy activity, to be amazed by young people and God’s presence in their lives, to let go of our anxieties, and to resist the oppressive forces that seek to destroy life. These movements prepare us to receive and bless the youth among us, just as Jesus blessed the children brought to him.

May these lectures feed your mind and your soul and give you new and useful tools for ministry.

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry

2003 Lectures

- Robert C. Dykstra Out of One's Depth: Seeking Soul in Solitude
Out of One's Depth: Finding Faith on the Fringe
- Rodger Nishioka Keepin' On, Keepin' On: Constancy as a Theological
Practice in Youth Ministry
Breaking In, Breaking Out: Disruption as a
Theological Practice in Youth Ministry
- Vivian Nix-Early Art: A Naturally Occurring Resource for Building
Bridges to the NU JERUZ
Art and Transformation: Using Art in Mission
and Ministry
- Mark Yaconelli A Bridge Demands a Life
A Life Creates a Bridge



A Bridge Demands a Life

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13–16

I was invited to give the keynote lecture on “prayer” at a regional conference.¹ I arrived one hour before I was scheduled to speak at a large downtown church. As I walked into the conference I was quickly greeted by the conference host whose first words were, “We have a situation.” She then took my arm and rapidly walked me down a stairwell into the basement of the building. In staccato sentences she explained: the conference was primarily for adults; a number of parents had brought teenagers; most of the teens had skipped the morning session; parents were afraid their kids were going to sneak out of my lecture and the evening worship service; the parents had met with the leadership; the decision had been made to have the kids meet with me before the evening session; the hope was that fewer kids would sneak out of the conference if they made some kind of personal connection with the speaker (me).

Before I could have a panic attack, she ushered me into a cinder-block basement that smelled of mold and cheap cleanser. In the room were two concentric circles. In the inner circle sat fifteen teenagers, slouched and sulking. In the outer circle sat a number of adults with Styrofoam cups of coffee, watching the young people like bailiffs in a courtroom.

Mark Yaconelli is founder and codirector of the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at San Francisco Theological Seminary. He has contributed chapters to *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* and *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*.

The host introduced me to the youth, and I sat down in their inner circle feeling pressured and anxious. I was angry and resentful about the expectations of the leadership. How was I going to win these kids over in one hour? How was I supposed to convince these kids to attend the conference and evening worship?

Not sure what to say and nervous about how to keep the attention of the youth and perform well for the adult onlookers, I decided to try and engage the young people in conversation around prayer (the subject of the conference). I told a story of my own experience of prayer as a child. I then asked the young people about their own childhood prayers. Surprisingly a few spoke up and offered intimate experiences of childhood prayer. This sparked memories from others in the group. The quality of the sharing deepened, drawing the group together. Miraculously, after thirty minutes we were so engaged in each other that we no longer were aware of being watched.

Feeling a sense of trust in the group I decided to shift the conversation. This was three weeks after the September 11th World Trade Center tragedy, and I knew it was on all of our minds. I asked the youth what their prayer life was like since the attack. There was a reflective silence. Then one young woman began to speak softly, "I stopped praying after the terrorist attack." "Say some more about that," I encouraged. "Well it's just that I know the people in those buildings were praying for God to help them. Their prayers were ignored. They died anyway." The air hung with tears as her words sunk in.

Then suddenly, "I think it's very possible that those prayers were answered." It was one of the adults on the outer circle. A mother leaned abruptly within the youth circle and continued to address the young woman, "We shouldn't stop praying because things don't turn out the way we want them. We don't know what those people in the buildings were praying. For all we know God might have answered their prayers by letting them into heaven right then."

Her comments landed like a dropped pan. The young woman looked embarrassed. I knew I needed to protect the sharing of the kids. I ignored the mother and continued to keep my attention on the young people. Gently I nudged them to come back to the question, "Any other comments? As the *young* people share, let's not comment on what's said. That way everyone can speak without worrying about how others will respond." I hoped this would quiet the adults.

After some silence one of the young men began to speak. “I’ve also stopped praying since September 11th.” The outer circle of adults shifted noticeably in their chairs, uncomfortable with the continued direction of the conversation. “Because I was thinking that the terrorists were probably praying that they would be successful. I know they were religious people, so I bet they were praying that they would have the strength to accomplish their mission. Their pray was answered. So I just feel I can’t pray to a God who answers that kind of prayer—a God who lets something horrible like that happen.”

Before we could take in these words, someone said, “I just have to interject here.” It was a man in his mid-fifties sliding his chair to face the group. “Let’s be clear. God did not answer that prayer. God has a plan. No matter how terrible this is it’s all a part of God’s larger plan. I know this is painful and confusing but look at all the good that’s happening because of the attack. People are returning to church. People are more grateful for their families. It’s brought this country together. God’s using this evil event for good.”

His tone was anxious and admonishing. The young people were silenced. I tried again to protect their sharing. “Let’s remember no commenting on what people share and let’s hear only from the youth for now.” This time I looked directly at the adults. The inner circle of youth sat still. Adults fidgeted in the long quiet. Finally a young teenage girl, about fourteen years old, spoke up. “Well, I haven’t stopped praying since the attack.” The adult onlookers relaxed. “But my prayer has changed. Ever since the 11th I’ve had this image come to me in my prayer time. In my prayer I picture that God has them all sitting together in heaven, talking about what happened and trying to understand one another. And so I’ve been praying for the people who were killed—the victims *and* the terrorists.”

I sat still, dumbstruck by this profound vision of grace and reconciliation. One of the adults slid his chair around the perimeter of the youth circle so he could face the girl who spoke. I later found out he was one of the retired pastors. “I think we need a reality check here. I saw a cartoon the other day in which these terrorists were all sitting in hell. One guy leans over to the other and says, ‘What happened to our heavenly hero’s welcome?’ I think that’s much closer to how God has dealt with those guys. Believe me, God is not caring for those murderers.”

I asked if any other young people wanted to share. I noticed the girl who had spoken looked shame-faced, staring at the floor. The other youth sat very still, their eyes unfocused and downcast, trying to avoid attention. They had

shut down, checked out. They weren't about to be tricked again into disclosing their true questions and doubts, their real spiritual practices and experiences of God.

My experience at the prayer conference reflects the dynamics in most youth ministries in mainstream congregations. An outside expert, or youth director, is brought in to deal with the youth. Young people feel unnatural and manipulated. Church leaders and parents stay uninvolved, observing and judging. The youth leader (paid or volunteer) feels put on the spot, isolated, and pressured to meet the expectations of the parents and church leaders. And every time a young person begins to act out or raise their real questions, doubts, problems, or frustrations they are dismissed, admonished, or forced to go along with the party line.

I've been reflecting on this experience because for me it captures the matrix of fear and desire present in youth ministry: the parent's desire for their children to stay involved in the church; the young people's fear that God may be absent; the youth worker's own fear about pleasing the adult and winning the attention of the young people. What bridge was I supposed to build in that setting? What bridges are possible between youth and God, minister and adults, youth and church?

Fear and Desire

The theme of this lecture series is "Building Bridges," and as I prepared for them, I read several books about bridges. I learned that the first step in building a bridge is surveying the natural forces at work—the landscape, weather patterns, tides, and currents. What I want to do in this lecture is survey the powers beneath youth ministry.

The more time I spend talking with ministers and church leaders the more I recognize that churches don't know why they're developing a youth program. And yet if you listen to pastors, parents, and church leaders talk about youth, you'll hear a powerful mixture of fear and desire. What is this matrix of fear and desire underneath youth ministries? How might we respond to these energies as we seek to build relationships of love?

Recently I had the opportunity to consult with a downtown, inner-city church. The leadership of the church had placed the spiritual formation of young people as the number one priority for the congregation. In response to this priority the leadership had spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours researching various approaches to youth discipleship. They had a com-

mittee that had spent a year flying out to different congregations across the West Coast to observe various successful youth ministry programs. This committee had compiled huge files of documents and interviews from these various churches. And yet, after a year of study the church leadership was completely confused.

I was called and asked to help the church sort out the data they had collected. The first night I was invited to have dinner with the church leadership. After dinner and small talk an elderly woman from the church board said, “You know, I just want to get right to the point. Here’s our frustration. We’re a downtown church. We’re across from the largest high school in this city with four thousand students.” (And literally their front door was about twenty yards from the front door of the high school.) “Yet we have less than twenty kids in our youth group. Will you tell me how to get those kids into this church?”

The room got quiet. I could tell this was the central question and frustration of the church leadership. I said to her, “Actually that’s not really so hard. You have a nice facility with a gym and large fellowship hall. You could have a pizza lunch. You could have a gym night. You could invite youth clubs, rock bands, or theater groups to come and use the church as practice space. The truth is that getting kids into your building is not difficult. My question is, ‘What do you want to do with these kids once they come into the church? What is so burning in you that you want to share it with these kids once they enter your church?’”

The whole session sat silent. Then for the next two days we began to talk about the deeper questions: What do we want for our kids? What are youth looking for in the church? What faith have we experienced that we want to pass on to our kids?

The desire I hear continually from pastors and congregations is this: “We want kids. We want our kids in church. We want our kids in worship.” My question is, “Why? Why do you want them? What is your desire for youth about?”

Help

In my opening Scripture passage Jesus had just entered a house after a long day of teaching crowds and debating religious leaders. By the end of the day word had spread that a great “spiritual teacher” or “miracle worker” was in town. People began to gather their children and seek out Jesus for themselves.

There's no indication in the Scriptures that these people had encountered Jesus before. Perhaps they had heard him teach? I'm sure many of them had only heard he was a powerful spiritual teacher. They certainly didn't know that he was the "image of the invisible God." So why were they bringing children to him? Why bring children to a teacher you knew so little about?

I believe these people who brought children to Jesus were no different than people today who return to church once they have children. Most likely they were parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and other adults who cared for young people. What were they looking for? The same thing those of us who care for children and young people are looking for today: help. We feel overwhelmed by the speed and complexity of life. We're confused about how to raise our children. The experts give us mixed advice; one day we're told to practice tough love, and the next day we're told to be more permissive. We're not sure how we should guide the lives of young people and yet those of us who are responsible for young people are bombarded each day with decisions that affect their formation as human beings. How should we handle the issues surrounding TV, video games, dating, parties, schoolwork, careers, and sports? We are often confused about our own values and limits in regards to these issues. We feel overwhelmed, confused, and eager for guidance, for help, or for a quick fix. Many of us turn to the Church. We take our concerns to Jesus hoping that we'll discover someone who will help us, someone with clarity, someone who knows what to do, someone to give our kids what we ourselves seem too confused and busy to offer.

Ministry of Hope

A few months ago I was invited to a board meeting for a local church to talk about youth ministry. The board was distressed that young people had stopped attending church despite investing time and money in an activity-packed youth program they called "Youth Power!" Instead of discussing the youth program I began the meeting by asking people to tell me why they started coming to church—surprisingly I found that almost all of them joined the church once they had children. They came to church because they thought it would be good for their kids. They wanted their kids to learn civic values and the morals of the Christian faith. They wanted their kids to be safe and involved in a "wholesome" program that would keep them away from getting involved with "bad" kids and "at-risk" activities.

I recommended that if their hope for the youth ministry was to keep youth morally proper and protected, they should be upfront and tell them. I suggested they change the name of the youth group from “Youth Power!” to “Nice and Safe!” They laughed, knowing that none of their kids were interested in a program that sounded so bland and protective. There was a pause; then one father spoke up, “You know I bet the reason our kids don’t like coming to church is because they know it’s all about us. They know that despite all the glitzy outings and exciting programs the program is really about our desire to teach them to be polite and stay out of trouble.” As this insight began to fill the room, many of the adults felt embarrassed at the exposure of their real intentions.

I reminded the group that it’s a good desire to want our kids to have high morals and to be safe. I asked them, however, to take a moment and notice if there wasn’t a deeper desire they harbored for their children and the young people of the church. I gave them a period of silence and invited them to become aware of their hearts, the place where Christ dwells. Then I asked them what they noticed about their deepest hope for young people.

The silence was rich and full. Some people welled up with tears. After a few minutes I asked people to share their thoughts. Here are some of the responses I collected:

- My hope is that my daughter will know how much she’s loved.
- My hope is that our young people can have a sense of God’s joy and peace even in hard times.
- I want our young people to know they have a community of faith that will carry them.
- My hope is that our young people will live lives of love.
- My hope is that my children will know that God is as close as their heartbeat, offering peace and strength.
- I hope that our kids will see Jesus as a companion, that they’ll realize they’re not alone.
- My hope is that our young people will know they are not just consumers, or statistics, or employees—that they have gifts and abilities that God has given them. I want them to know that Jesus supports them in being themselves.
- I want our kids to know that they belong to a long history of people who have followed Jesus in standing up to injustice and bringing light into the world.

The Scripture says that people brought their kids to Jesus “in order that he might touch them.” I believe this is the same desire that exists in the heart of parents and congregations. We want our kids to be touched. We want them to be blessed. We want them to make contact with the source of life. We want them to know the freedom of Jesus. We want them to be alive.

The Ministry of Fear

If we are not grounded in our desire to love our kids, we create ministries based on fear. Notice the way fear was present in my experience at the prayer conference. The parents were afraid the kids would skip the conference, so they forced the kids to meet with the speaker. The youth were afraid of being stuck in a boring meeting that had nothing to do with them, so they checked out. The parents were afraid their kids would leave the gathering, so they sat behind their kids, guarding them. I was afraid of the expectations from the adults and the youth and felt angry. In the midst of this pressure cooker, amazingly, the youth began to open up; yet when they shared their real questions and experiences of prayer, the adults became anxious, fearing their kids were questioning the faith, doubting God, and expressing unorthodox beliefs. The young people were treading into the unknown. They were questioning God; they were exposing the unexamined beliefs and practices of the adults. They were raising fear.

Why do youth scare us? Where does this fear come from? Here are four reflections on the source of our fear in relationship to young people:

1. Afraid of what we don't know. “They're clueless” is a common adolescent dismissal of parents and adults. And if we're honest, many of us are. We don't know what they look at on the Internet, we don't understand the video games they play, we've never heard of the bands or celebrities they talk about, we don't know what they do after school, and we're unaware of the subject or codes in their e-mail conversations. All of this makes us afraid. The truth is that in North America, most adults don't know young people. Family therapist and author Ron Taffel writes:

No matter how hard they try many parents don't really hear their children. They don't really see them. They don't know enough about the world their children inhabit, their interests, their motives. They know even less about adolescence, because too many of their children, as young as twelve or thirteen, have already drifted away from them.”²

Young people live separate lives from parents and adults. This separation begins long before adolescence. Youth spend most of their childhood segregated from adults. Once children in the United States turn two years old, most are sent off to day care. As soon as they hit five they will increasingly spend their time in school or in front of television and computer screens. By the age of thirteen they will be spending twenty-four hours a week in front of the television or computer. By the time they fully enter adolescence young people are attuned to a different reality, a different world than adults. The less we know, the less we want to know. We stay out of it, because we don't have the time or the interest to learn the video games, listen to their music, watch their videos and television shows, or hear what's going on at school. Our worry causes us to cover our eyes and ears, cross our fingers, and hope for the best. We put a TV in their room so we don't have to face or argue about what they're watching. We send them away to youth rooms and Sunday school classes. We ignore the signs that they're in trouble. We spend less time with them. We get busy with our own projects and activities.

Over time the lives of youth become mysterious to us. We become estranged. Our own children bewilder us. All of this unknowing scares us. We fall into projection, speculation, worry, and fearful imaginings.

2. Afraid of what we imagine. Out of this unknowing we rely on the media to enlighten us. We read the frequent stories about teenage gangs and violence. We watch videos and movies that portray young people as hormone-driven, sex-crazed nymphs. We hear news stories and government reports that talk alarmingly about "at-risk" kids. All of this becomes a filter through which we view young people. We see teenagers in baggy jeans and oversized jackets and fear they're hiding drugs or weapons. We see a group of young women in short halter tops and lipstick and worry about their sexual activity.

Even amidst our worst fears, the opposite is true—drug use and sexual promiscuity have continually *decreased* over the past twenty years among young people. So much so that Bill Strauss, co-author with Neil Howe of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, claims, "Never before has there been a generation that is less violent, less vulgar, less sexually charged than the culture being offered them."³ We fail to recognize that adults are far more "at-risk" than young people. We are unable to perceive the truth that, as Strauss claims, "we need a youth committee on adult drug abuse, not the other way around."⁴ Instead we believe the story the media and culture tell us about youth. We don't take the time to get to know our youth as they are in reality.

Looking through the media lens, youth seem no longer our children, no longer people; instead we perceive them to be a dangerous tribe, a cluster of “at-risk” statistics that evoke fear and apprehension.

3. Afraid of what we know. Sometimes our fear for young people arises out of what we do know. We get scared when young people reflect behaviors and attitudes that we recognize as our own. Their desire for pleasure, material goods, entertainment gadgets, constant activity, sex, and illegal substances all mirrors the behavior of the adult culture. There is much we don’t like about ourselves. There are mistakes we’ve made. When young people begin to reflect our values and conduct we get frightened. We become fearful they’ll end up like us.

I remember a mother of a teenager in my youth group who was terrified her daughter was going to start smoking. She brought her daughter to youth group in hopes that she would get involved with “good” kids and healthy activities. She obsessively questioned me after every retreat and camp event to see if her daughter had been smoking. The reason she was so scared was that she began smoking in high school and even as an adult was unable to stop the addiction. Often the things we fear most in our young people are the issues we haven’t resolved in ourselves. As Thomas Hines, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, writes, we fear youth because “we want them to grow into healthier, wealthier, and wiser versions of ourselves.”⁵

4. Afraid of what they know. Once when I was evaluating the youth program in a mid-western church, I sat down with some of the youth, the senior pastor, and members of the church leadership for an interview. As we talked about the youth involvement in the church, one young woman mentioned that she didn’t attend the worship service. This surprised me since she claimed to be a very committed Christian and was president of the youth group. When I asked her why she didn’t attend church, she said, “because it’s boring.” I’d heard this response many times and wanted to dig deeper. “What would make the service less boring for *young people* like you?” She replied immediately, “I didn’t say it was boring for young people. I said it was boring. Everyone is bored—my parents, the church leaders, and the other adults. But because I’m young, I can complain that I need to sleep-in, so my parents don’t make me go. But I know they’re just as bored. I don’t understand why everyone else doesn’t stay home.”

She spoke plainly without condemnation, her eyes looking openly at the rest of the group. I was stunned by her honesty. I noticed that the other adults

kept their eyes downcast, afraid to meet her gaze. The pastor turned red-faced. He “humphed,” flustered and tongue-tied.

What scares us most is the way in which youth remind us of our own adolescent heart—our unmet longings and questions. They painfully unearth the contradictions between our beliefs and the concrete ways in which we live our lives. They cause us to reflect on our own spiritual uncertainties, the cracks in our own values and beliefs.

Anxiety

When our fear goes unrecognized, when it lies within us unacknowledged, it often turns into anxiety. Reflect on these common activities that young people engage in: sitting in Sunday school with headphones blaring music; playing video games that let the player dismember their victims; sitting with friends giggling and whispering during the sermon; displaying tattoos and body piercings. These and other now common teenage activities raise questions that make us anxious.

Anxiety is the inability to be present. It’s a state of agitation in which we are unable to see, hear, or feel in the present moment. Anxiety comes from words that denote “to choke.” When we’re anxious, we can’t breathe. We feel closed in with fewer and fewer choices. We take shallow breaths, unable to attend to any of the real fears or other emotions that might be within us. We are lost in our heads; our mind oscillates between the future and the past—we worry about what should have happened or fear what might take place. In anxiety we lose touch with what’s driving us. Our actions become reactive and compulsive.

The remedy to anxiety is slowing down. It means getting sleep and doing less. Jesus offered that when we are in a state of worry we need to slow down and attend to the beauty of what’s around us. We need to attend to the present moment, leaving tomorrow’s worries for tomorrow (Luke 12:22–31). We need to take time to look at our children, our young people, to allow ourselves to be in wonder at their beauty. We need to take time to be amazed at this life—its horrors as well as its miracles.

Teenagers make adults anxious. In response to this anxiety we keep our distance. We don’t want them to force us to clarify or define our values. We resent their demands for more of our time and energy. We’re tired of how they question the way we live, so most of the time we ignore them. We dismiss our young people. Then we sit back and hope the culture will guide them.

Playing Jesus

Why did the disciples speak sternly to the children who sought a blessing? Why do we continue to send young people to church basements and age-segregated classes? The disciples were tired. They had spent the day among crowds. They were anxious. They didn't know how to handle the noise and energy of the kids nor the demands of the parents and adults who brought them. They were afraid of what was being demanded of them. They were angry that this crowd came to impose on their private time with Jesus.

In their fearfulness they confused themselves with Jesus. They somehow thought that they needed to control the situation. They believed somehow they needed to satisfy the desires of the crowd. And in this confusion they projected their feelings of exhaustion and anxiety onto Jesus. We hear the same thing in church every Sunday: "Don't make so much noise!" "Stop squirming around!" "No more fooling around, this is serious." "Stop bothering us while we're trying to be spiritual!"

When those coming to see Jesus claim, "We want to see Jesus." You can hear the disciples reply: "Jesus is tired." "Jesus needs a break!" "Jesus doesn't want you here right now!" As ministers we often act similarly to the disciples. Out of anxiety we place ourselves in the center of the ministry. We project our own feelings and limitations onto Jesus. We get angry. We try and take control of the situation. Meanwhile, while we're serving as ministers, while we're being witnesses for Christ, while we're doing the hard work of Christian service, while we're busy trying to keep our church in order telling kids to "quiet down" and "stop asking so many questions" and while we're sending young people out of worship and down to the youth room to watch a video, we make the same mistake the disciples made. We turn our backs to Jesus.

A Bridge Demands a Life

A friend of mine from Claremont School of Theology interviewed a group of pastors from Southern California. These pastors were diverse in their denominational, racial, ethnic, and theological backgrounds. They led churches that varied in size, practice, and congregational demographics; yet, when my friend from Claremont asked these pastors what kind of youth ministry they wanted for their churches, the answer was the same: a twenty-something, attractive, guitar-playing, charismatic, youth-savvy, clean-cut, hip, hard-working, van-driving, free-spirited, denominationally loyal, Jesus-loving, Bible-carrying, old-people-friendly, faith-filled, fiscally responsible, youth

leader (preferably male with decorative facial hair and surfboard strapped to car roof or, if unavailable, a spunky, to-die-for, fashion-conscious female who will cry once on youth Sundays and twice on summer mission trips).

Although the pastors didn't get this specific, I've handled enough phone calls from pastors and search committees across the country to know that this is what they mean. The Southern California pastors, and almost every church I know, secretly prays and waits for the coming of the youth ministry messiah. That dynamo of a young adult who can relieve parents and church members of their burdensome youth, someone who will take away all the anxiety over junior high Sunday school class, someone who will offer forgiveness to church members saying, "Come to me all you who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest. Your ridiculous attempts at ministry are washed away and forgotten. I release you from all guilt and responsibility. I, the savior to adolescents, am all that is needed. Go now in peace, and worry not for your children, for they are safe in my tan and well-defined arms."

I titled this first lecture "A Bridge Demands a Life." This is a saying I came across numerous times as I read books on bridge building. It's a saying that goes back to ancient times when laborers would build a bridge over a waterway. Often before building the bridge, a community would offer a human sacrifice to appease the gods. This saying continues to be repeated by contemporary bridge builders, because up to this day every major bridge that has ever been built has experienced a number of deaths during its construction. A bridge demands a life.

Unfortunately this saying could also be the motto of most youth ministries. The assumption that exists today in youth ministry is that in order to build a bridge to young people, we as youth ministers must be sacrificed. We must offer our lives. We must be sent into the church basements alone with our Oreos and broken five-string guitars. We must go out among young people so that a bridge can be built.

A bridge demands a life, and we, as youth ministers, are expected to be that life. We are expected to become isolated from the adult community, burdened with the souls of a community's young people, and harnessed by the expectations of church leaders.

What is our role, if not to become the congregational sacrifice? How do we minister in the midst of these fears and desires? Maybe our role is not to be the bridge but rather a sign that the bridge has already been built and can be trusted. Remember Indiana Jones in the *The Last Crusade*? He was seeking the

Holy Grail and had gone through a series of obstacles and trials to find it. At one point he came to the edge of a deep, wide canyon. There was no visible bridge across the canyon, and he realized that to cross it, he had to take a leap of faith. It became clear that he was being asked to step off the ledge and trust that there would be something there to catch him. In that dramatic moment, Indiana Jones closed his eyes and stepped off the edge. Suddenly the bridge emerged, already built, already created, already there to carry him across.

Sharing Fear

Recall my experience at the prayer conference and my conversation with youth about prayer and the September 11th tragedy. What would've happened if the adults shared their own anxieties instead of controlling and shaming the young people? What if they had sat in the circle with the youth and opened up about their own fears around the terrorist attack? What if they had really listened to the questions and experiences the youth were offering, instead of trying to fix, quiet, or admonish them.

The questions that the youth articulated touched my own fears and questions around the tragedy. They forced me to reflect on my prayer life and my own relationship with God. To welcome those searching young people was to welcome my own pain, fear, and doubts. And in that recognition, I too was invited to turn my attention to Jesus, to wonder at who he is and the hope he offers. What if the adults had sat with the young people, instead of behind them? What if they had told the young people that they too were scared and had no ready answers? What if the adults had encouraged the youth to join them in bringing all of their doubts, pain, and frustration to God? What if the adults had invited the youth to pray with them—or perhaps had prayed for the youth? This would have relieved the pressure I felt as the isolated leader. It would have relieved the anxiety of the adults to play God and give the right answers when there were no answers. It would have mitigated the anxiety of the young people who felt disconnected from God and isolated in their doubts and questions.

As young people grow into adulthood they are less and less interested in our answers. Instead they seek our hearts. They want to know how we live with experiences like September 11th? How do we pray and live in the midst of terror and tragedy? How do we have faith in a world that embodies so much chaos and suffering? They want companions in the questions, not to be

handed quick answers and sent to bed. Will we open our hearts? Are we willing to receive their questions and share our fears?

Show Me Your Heart

Most youth ministries in North America are ministries of fear. People are afraid the church membership is dying, they're afraid they won't attract young families, they're afraid young people aren't committing to the Christian faith, they're afraid young people don't have values, and on and on. These fears are often the impetus for a church to start a youth ministry.

If we do not stay close to our hearts, if we neglect our own desire for God, if we forget our deepest hope for young people, we are in danger of creating ministries of fear. Six months after September 11th, I was asked to moderate a conversation between adults and youth on church life. The subject of the World Trade Center tragedy came up, and the adults talked coolly about how Christians should respond. One junior high girl finally interrupted the conversation. I wrote down her words: "I'm feeling really weird because everyone here is acting so calm, but I know deep down all of you adults are as scared as I am. We don't know if we're going to have our water poisoned tomorrow or have a suicide bomber show up in the grocery store. And we don't know if God is doing anything or not...or if God even exists. So I just want everyone to stop pretending like you understand everything and it's all going to be O.K. It's not going to be O.K. And it makes me more scared when I feel like I'm the only one who has these feelings."

The appeal I heard from this young girl is the same appeal I've heard from hundreds of other young people toward adults: "Show me your heart. What do you trust? What keeps you alive? How do you face the terror and despair? Show me your heart, so I don't feel alone, so I know I'm not strange, so I know how to live."

Repent

In Mark 10:13–16, people were bringing children to the disciples so that Jesus might bless them, and the disciples got irritated. They tried to manage the crowd. They tried to organize them. They were exhausted. They projected their exhaustion onto Jesus. The disciples assumed that the desires of the crowd were directed toward them. The disciples assumed that it was up to them to respond to the fears and anxieties of these parents and caregivers. And in that assump-

tion, they turned their backs on Jesus. In responding to the fears and anxieties of those who were carrying children they turned away from Jesus.

That is why Jesus became indignant. He was seeking to return their attention. He was seeking to remind the disciples that the crowd was not seeking them; the crowd was seeking God. He was seeking to awaken the disciples. He was calling the disciples to repent, to turn.

When Jesus yelled, “Stop!” their attention was suddenly brought back to the one they served, to the one they longed for. In that turning, all began to face the one who had plenty of time; the one who had plenty of space; the one who was neither anxious nor worried; the one who is able to receive the needs and longings of all of us—young, old, disciple, youth worker, parent, pastor.

What does this mean for us as youth ministers? What does this mean to turn and attend to the presence of Christ? How do we build bridges of faith in the midst of these anxious crowds? The answer is we don’t. We don’t build bridges. Instead we recognize and celebrate that the bridge has already been built.

We remind ourselves that all we’re asked to do is be a witness to this bridge; to sit with parents in their anxiety, not to fix or react to it. To sit with church leaders in their fears and desires and listen to the hope underneath. To befriend young people in their fears and desires about life and faith and, when appropriate, to expose our own. Most of all we are asked to trust. When we step into the unknown, into those bottomless fears or relentless desires, we are asked to trust that Jesus is there, that the bridge has already been built.

Notes

1. This essay and the one following originated as oral lectures. I have kept the informal oral presentation style for the most part by editing the original transcripts.
2. Ron Taffel and Melinda Blau, *The Second Family: How Adolescent Power Is Challenging the American Family* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), p. 7.
3. Bill Strauss, interview by Mary McNamara, in “If You Can’t Join ’Em, Boss ’Em Around...and Imitate Them,” *The Los Angeles Times* (25 September, 2000).
4. Ibid.
5. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Avon, 1999), p. 20.