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STORY BY  
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## Rooting youth in the Spirit

*Meaningful ministry focuses on the sacred and serving*

*At the end of a youth event I asked Mark, a seventh-grader, to close in prayer. His reply, "Um, I don't know any."*

*Following a high school mission trip, Adam said to me, "This was the most meaningful week of my life. God has really changed me, but now what?"*

My youth ministry has been shaped by these two experiences. Many youth don't know how to pray. They don't know how to be with God. They also don't know how to respond once God has touched and changed their lives. And they long to be with God — a God who is alive, active, radical, even earthshaking.

*Often all the church provides them is pizza and games, discussions or doctrine and, in some places, rock music at worship — all offered under the assumption that it's what they want or need. Not necessarily so.*

### Understanding the sower

*Our problem is that we misunderstand the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9). We think we're the sowers, but maybe we're just tillers. God scatters the seeds of faith through word and sacrament. It's our job to till the soil into which these seeds are planted — so they might take root and sprout. Many youth ministries are more concerned with seed-scattering than soil-tilling.*

*Seed is sown when God's word is spoken, seen, felt and heard. The Spirit works the word deep into the soil of our being so it takes root and sprouts, much like a tree breaks through the earth's surface and reaches for the sunlight. Our lives are transformed and our Christian faith becomes the Christian walk. So, what does this look like with youth?*

### Let the planting begin

*First, youth ministry is planted, nourished and tended in worship. If faith is scattered and sown through word and sacraments, youth need to be in worship. But how many of our youth attend worship?*

*Many churches, including mine, offer Sunday school during worship. Parents find it convenient to send kids to class while they attend service, and both young people and their parents are eager to follow the path of least resistance. If faith is fed by the sacraments, young people need to regularly receive communion and witness baptisms. A youth ministry not centered around word and sacraments neglects its assignment as tiller.*

*Second, youth ministry honors the schedules and deep needs of young people. When a seed has been planted, it deserves and requires attention. The church's ancient disciplines help young people pay attention to a God who longs to be with them.*

*That kind of interaction requires three things: stopping, space and silence. There is a time when we must stop, when we can do no more. In youth ministry, we can help young people honor the Sabbath — trusting that God is in control and will provide. Today's young people need to stop "doing" so they can start "being."*

*The stress, chaos and messiness of life will never go away, but we can help young people realize their busyness isn't equated with their worth. Then, by our example and with our words, we help them create space in their lives. Time for prayer, for instance. After all, Jesus was our best example (Mark 1:35).*

*As we help young people discover holy space and sacred silence, they just may pay attention to what God is saying and doing in our lives. "Silence gives me time to reflect on my past week and on the week ahead of me," says John Schwehn, 16, a member of Christ Lutheran Church, Valparaiso, Ind., and a beneficiary of its youth ministry ritual of lighting a candle at the beginning of each gathering. This simple act of focusing on Christ's presence*

*and observing silence has made all the difference in the group's time together.*

*"It's easier to see where God is at work in my life or to understand what God is asking me to do when I'm silent than if I were just shooting pool all the time. I guess it's just easier for me to experience God in silence than in noise and busyness," Schwehn adds.*

### Responding in faith

*Third, we must help young people live their faith. Silence is golden, but we would be fools to remain there. This*

*world contains too much hurt and pain, and we each are gifted to help. As young people encounter God, they long to respond. Like Adam after the mission trip, they ask, "How am I needed? How can I serve? Challenge me. Show me. Teach me what to do now that this seed of faith has sprouted and broken through the surface."*

*The normal, everyday practices of the Christian life offer young people a way to live out the transformation they've experienced in Christ's presence.*

*A life of faith isn't just about solemn worship and prayer. It is about eating, laughing, working, playing, working for justice and experiencing forgiveness. It's about the everyday real stuff of life. But all too often, youth ministry focuses on one-time, short-term mission experiences, not enabling young people to live their faith day in and day out.*

*For us, it means extended preparation and follow-up from mission trips so young people aren't just hopping from mountaintop to mountaintop. It also means being part of a congregation that honors social ministry and encourages families to serve.*

*In a youth ministry based on sacredness and serving, the spirituality we nourish and the faith practices we nurture send the roots of a young person's faith deeper and make branches stronger.*

**Resources:**

*The ELCA and other ecumenical partners are involved in both projects on which Jeremy Myers bases this article:*

- *The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project: [www.sfts.edu](http://www.sfts.edu).*
- *Faith Practices: [www.waytolive.org](http://www.waytolive.org).*

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