Engaging Youth

Or… Wisconsin Evangelical *Youth-eran* Synod?
Or… Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Youth *Not* Alone? [1]

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Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them…" (Ecclesiastes 12:1)

"For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth." (Psalm 71:5) [2] [3] [4] [5]

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[1] See what I did there?
[2] Here's the assignment I was given, and I quote: "We are basically looking for a way to engage teenagers or young adults in ministry. That could be a number of different things like involving them in service or simply keeping them active in the life of the congregation… You have 1.5 hours." … This paper is not overly academic. My sources are several books and papers that I read on the topic; you can find those in the bibliography at the end. And I had several discussion panels with youth: college students, high school students, and my eighth-grade catechism class. I promised them that they would remain anonymous, so no names are given for each quote. But the quotes are real.
[3] Over the years of my ministry, I've learned that the quality of a good conference paper is having more footnotes than actual content in your paper. Let's see how I do… I could be a contender… :)
[4] Also… if you don't dig my sense of humor… maybe don't ask me to write another paper. (Part of my goal?? Who's to say??)
[5] Thanks, AI, for this beautiful image of me as a youth pastor. :)

(Youth “engaged” in worship.) :)

Introduction

"Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

When I was first given this assignment, I walked through the basement of our church where we have the confirmation pictures of every year's confirmation class at St. John's since our founding in 1948 (78 years of class photos). Some names are famous. They have since become professors. Others are infamous because they left the WELS to start the CLC. There are many sons and daughters of pastors, teachers, and professors. (I don't know how to verify this, but St. John's boasts that they have produced more Called workers than any other church in our synod… including those in Watertown.) [6]

I've been at St. John's for eight years now. And we've averaged about a dozen confirmands per year. That means that I've personally confirmed about one hundred students since I've been a pastor in New Ulm. But looking at the photos on the wall for the last eight years makes me… well… sad. Why?

There are many smiling faces in those photos that I have hardly seen since their confirmation day. And when I do see them, it's sometimes more often that I see them at McDonald's or Walmart than at St. John's.

I went through those photos. I counted roughly thirty out of one hundred confirmands—about 30%—who are no longer active. So, I thought, "Why in the world did the assignment committee ask ***me*** to write a paper on connecting the youth to the church?!"

But then I thought about my ministry experience. My ministry has placed me in contact with nearly every age group—from toddlers at the MLC Early Childhood Learning Center [7] to college students at MLC [8], from grade school classrooms to high school chapel and board work at MVL.

While I am no expert and wish I had better than 70% of my confirmands still connected to our church, I have had a front-row seat to the spiritual lives of young people at every stage.

For this paper I read several books and even more essays and website articles. I interviewed a focus panel of college students, a few high schoolers, and my eighth-grade catechism class. So, nothing I'm going to say is original to me. I stole it all. But from what I read and from what I heard, everyone agreed that the challenges and solutions are the same.

This paper argues that youth engagement is not primarily a program problem, but a ***connection problem***—solved through Christ-centered identity, pastoral relationships, and intergenerational belonging. So, I share with you what I've gleaned from others…

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[6] If Watertown would unite, they would beat us for sure. But from any ***individual*** congregation, I've heard that St. John's still holds the title. Bring it, Watertown!

[7] A sticky and gross ministry at times. I use lots of hand sanitizer afterwards.

[8] Less stick, but sometimes just as gross. Jk. :)

1) Connecting to Pre-Adult Problems
2) Connecting them to the Prince of Peace
3) Connecting them to the Pastor of the Pulpit
4) Connecting them to the Proofs of the Passion
5) Connecting them to the People of the Pew
6) Connecting them to the Purpose of Pentecost
7) Connecting them to their Peers and Parents [9]

1. Connecting to Pre-Adult Problems

"Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come." (Psalm 71:18)

The "Confirmation ***at*** Church equals Graduation ***from*** Church" syndrome still seems to be just as real as it was in my day. [10] According to one study 75% of youth leave the church. [11] That makes me feel better about my 30%. But since each soul matters, 30% is still way too high. The problem is real.

Post-Confirmation is a time for disengagement from the church. Whether it's due to secular influences in public schools and universities, a growing independence that pushes back against whatever mom and dad believe, or just the busyness of life, stretching the wings, and moving on to "bigger and better things," there is a stage in life where young men and women drift from the church… hopefully to return when they have children of their own they wish to be baptized.

But is there something we can do to prevent that trend? Is there a way we can engage the youth of our churches to keep them as active participants? WELS President, Mark Schroeder, asks this probing question: "We rightly are filled with a desire to do all we can to search and find the lost – to bring people into God's church through the power of the gospel. But what about our commitment to holding on to the young people who are already in God's family? How much time and energy do we devote to preventing our confirmands from straying from worship, God's Word, and even the faith?" [12]

According to our WELS Congregational Services Statistical Report (2024) [13] here's the data; the specific demographic trends affecting teens within the synod: We currently have a historic low in confirmations: In 2024, WELS recorded 3,445 youth confirmations, ***the lowest number in the synod's history***! This is part of a 20-year downward trend primarily attributed to a declining birth rate. For five consecutive years (2020–2024), total births within WELS have remained below 3,000 (In the decade prior, the average was 5,700 births per year), meaning the internal "feeder" demographic for youth ministry has effectively been cut in half.

On a positive note, net spiritual losses (those leaving the church) also hit a record low of 2,315 in 2024, compared to a previous decade average of 5,300. This suggests that while fewer teens are *entering* the system, *retention* of existing members is improving. Let's keep that up! Despite the overall membership decline, Area Lutheran High School enrollment is growing. For the 2025–26 school year, enrollment rose 2.6% to 7,680 students—many of whom are mission prospects—proving that the "fields are white for harvest." (John 4:35) Youth Bible study attendance saw a slight increase of 0.8% in 2024, marking the fourth consecutive

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[9] I like alliteration. :)

[10] I was in a confirmation class of three. Two of us are still in the church – to God be the glory! – and one of the three of us is now dead, because of an overdose.

[11] https://victoriousfamily.org/2025/05/07/family-parenting-discipleship-bible-coaching-planning-intentional-giving-christmas-grandparenting-gifts-4/

[12] WELS President, Mark Schroeder, in a March 2026 *Forward in Christ* article entitled "Hold on to What You Have."

[13] https://welscongregationalservices.net/download/wels-statistical-report-2024/

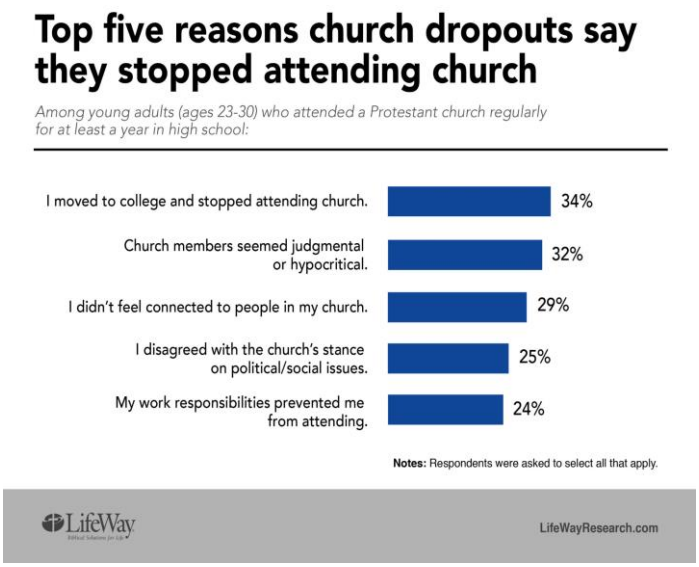
year of growth in this area. And the 2024 International Youth Rally saw roughly 2,200 teens attend, making it the second-largest rally in WELS history. [14]

We're not doing a terrible job. We're not failing. But neither can we be complacent. With confirmations at a historic low of 3,445 and birth rates declining, we can no longer rely on "biological growth" to sustain our congregations. We still need to ask, "How can we keep our youth connected to Christ in this uniquely vulnerable stage of life?"

What are the challenges our youth are facing as we try to keep them in the church? What makes it a "uniquely vulnerable stage of life"?

- "Mental health is a huge thing for our generation and the generations following."
- "Destigmatize therapy. Christian Family Solutions is a very good thing. You don't have to feel bad for going to get help."
- "You can love Jesus ***and*** be depressed."
- Kids are not talking to each other. They're just in their phone…" [15] [16]

  ~ MLC students in my focus group.



One MVL teacher noted that kids are much more anxious these days than they were in my (our) generation: **"**I see all around me a sharp decline in mental health among young people, depression is on the rise. ***Comparison is the theft of joy, and with easy access to the internet, comparison is everywhere***."

An MLC student said, "[Social media…] is good in some ways because you see other people going through stuff, or you see encouragement through it… people posting Bible verses or showing their struggles and how they got through it. It's also bad, because… They always post their best, right? And so there's this false expectation…" ~ MLC student

Here's more from MLC students…

- "MVL has started a "Screen-Free Tuesday," which is really cool. They have to turn in their phones to their homeroom."
- "[Social media] shortens their attention span. So… you have to try extra hard to entertain them…"
- "[There is] the expectation that as soon as you get a phone, you should get social media too… These nine- and ten-year-olds… as soon as they get a phone… are getting Snapchat and Instagram right away, which is a huge problem!"

"[Youth struggle with] anxiety and identity. Getting outside of their screens and having real moments that make real memories… Give opportunities for memories to be made. Help them to see their identity as

[14] Thanks, Jon Hein, for putting together these numbers! … At least, I assume this is from Jon Hein who loves crunching numbers as much as I like crunching nachos. :/

[15] Note: She didn't say "***on*** their phone," but "***in*** their phone." There's a key difference there.

[16] I had over a dozen quotes on most of these points. But the paper was getting too long. These were consistent themes though.

Children of God and help them to see anxiety as a response to situations that are challenges and something that can be managed and overcome." [17]

When I was a kid, my biggest concerns were about the air in my bike tires and what new Nintendo game had just come out. Today, kids (pre-teens) are bombarded with social media messages of what's cool, what they should look like, be like, act like, and how they're not cool but undesirable if they don't meet those standards. (For me, ignorance was bliss. I didn't know that I wasn't cool. So, it didn't bother me. Today's youth are constantly reminded of it on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. That's a lot of pressure.)

According to the research done by the authors of "Faith Beyond Youth Group," [18] youth today are three things: anxious, adaptive, and diverse.

They are adaptive. They can pivot on a dime. That's something they've had to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic. They shifted. And they've learned to do it well. This generation is far more adaptive than our generations. Kudos to them for that. They're tough. They're resilient.

They are diverse. Currently, two thirds of Americans are white. But one half of those ***under 18*** are not. [19] That's changing the dynamic and the culture of our nation. And our kids are far more accepting of other cultures than our generations were. With the information overload the internet provides, they've seen it all and accept every background as "normal." We should be ready to embrace that and be prepared to speak to African Americans with a Baptist background, Somali immigrants and followers of Islam, Roman Catholic Hispanics, and people from around the globe. The next generation will likely be far better equipped to carry out the Great Commission with compassion.

Those are the positives. But… of those three adjectives "Faith Beyond Youth Group" uses to describe the youth of today – anxious, adaptive, and diverse – what we should perhaps focus on is "anxious." The suicide rate among youth today is higher than it's ever been. The number of youth that are on the spectrum of "learning disabilities" is higher than it's ever been. The number of kids on medications to mediate some of these challenges is higher than it's ever been. It's staggering. And the number of kids who struggle with depression is on an all-time high. [20] [21]

There are challenges. We know the pre-adult problems. But what do we do about it? I will offer several suggestions (and then eagerly seek your input and feedback). [22] How can we help the youth of today stay connected to Christ and to the Church? Let me know what you think…

2. <u>Connect them to the Prince of Peace</u>

"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27)

You may remember what it was like as a kid… Maybe not… it's been a while for some of you. [23] Some of you who know me better might be surprised to know that I was an extreme introvert as a kid. I didn't know how to talk to people. And this might come as a bigger shock to you… I wasn't great with the ladies. I was very

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[17] Mike Wiechmann, MVL art teacher, St. John's Youth Group Leader

[18] Faith Beyond Youth Group: Five Ways to Form Character and Cultivate Lifelong Discipleship

[19] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church

[20] Ibid.

[21] I highly recommend the book, "Christians Get Depressed Too" by David P. Murray. One of the MLC students interviewed stressed the point that we should let students (everyone) know that "It's okay to not be okay."

[22] I'm no expert and want your advice at how I can do this better in New Ulm.

[23] Okay… I admit… "some of ***us***." :/

nervous about what anyone thought of me. [24] But you maybe remember the insecurity you felt as a young adult. The anxiety is real.

So, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, but first and foremost, it is our job to keep kids connected to Christ and help them to find their identity ***in him***. The fundamental need of every young person (of *every* person) is not improved self-esteem, but a clear and objective identity grounded in Christ. That's what I am convinced relieves the anxiety.

Men tend to find their identity in their professions. [25] Women tend to find their identity in their relationships (to their husbands, but especially to their kids). And youth tend to find their identity in what their peers think of them.

As youth transition to adulthood, they often ask these questions: "Who am I? A product of my parents…? Or my own person?" "Who am I? … An athlete? A mathlete? An actor or actress? The funny kid? The class clown?" [26] "What gives me value and worth as a person?" "Do other kids like me?"

But we're all wrong in trying to find our identity anywhere else but in Christ. Sports, dates, academics, jobs, kids, jokes… none of these give us our true identity. Who are you? You are a redeemed and forgiven child of God, a son or daughter of the King of the Universe, dearly loved, protected, and guarded, with special purpose and a mission to live for him.

Here's Mike Wiechmann again: "[Youth struggle with] anxiety and identity. Getting outside of their screens and having real moments that make real memories… Give opportunities for memories to be made. ***Help them to see their identity as Children of God*** and help them to see anxiety as a response to situations that are challenges and something that can be managed and overcome." [27] (Emphasis mine.)

And one of the MLC students I interviewed put it this way: "[For a] pastor, the job is to give you forgiveness. So, if you're giving them forgiveness… Parents might not always seem to forgive you all the time… [But give] the gospel, gospel, gospel… [And if] you do that with one person, and they notice their friend struggling, they're going to pass it on to their friends, and say, 'Hey, my pastor is really comforting about this and maybe you go talk to him.' It's just word of mouth. It just keeps passing."

Here I recommend the books "Christ-Esteem" by Don Matzat and "Who Am I?" by Phil Huebner (cf. bibliography). The former emphasizes that we have no real claim to "self-esteem" because we are terrible sinners, deserving of only death and hell. But in Christ, we are redeemed, forgiven, dearly loved children of God. We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9)

"Who Am I?" while written for teens, is just as applicable for adults. Who are you? What defines you as a person? It's not that you are an athlete or a mathlete, the funny kid or the popular kid, the jock or the cheerleader. You are a Christian. You are a little Christ. Your baptism made it so. *That's* what defines you.

"Raising Emotionally Strong Boys" (cf. bibliography) [28] reminds that one's identity is NOT based on feelings. Personal emotions—feeling unloved, anxious, worthless, lonely, or insecure—can mislead us about who we truly are. Instead, identity should be rooted in what God has revealed and accomplished through Jesus.

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[24] I know… hard to believe because of how little I care about that now.

[25] …Perhaps this is especially true for pastors who lose their first name for their title?

[26] That's where I found my identity. If I didn't get friends (or teachers) to laugh… well… I wasn't the most emotionally healthy kid.

[27] Mike Wiechmann, MVL art teacher, St. John's Youth Group Leader, hero.

[28] And I would suggest that this excellent book is just as applicable to girls and fully grown men and women alike.

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God…" (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Identity is not constructed, it is *bestowed…* by God. Let's help our young brothers and sisters to see that; to remember their baptisms and to find their identity in Christ. Let's help them see the facts of Christianity: Who you are is based on what Christ has done, on what God's Word says about you, on objective truth, NOT on subjective feelings or cultural messaging. "Feelings can deceive, but facts from Scripture are eternal." [29]

You are not defined by your successes or failures. You are not defined by your popularity. You, dear pastor, are not defined by your ministry or if people like your sermons and compliment your Bible classes or not. God's grace covers you on your best days and on your worst days. ***"Your <u>best</u> days are never so good that you are beyond the <u>need</u> of God's grace." … "Your <u>worst</u> days are never so bad that you are beyond the <u>reach</u> of God's grace."*** [30] Feelings are temporary and unreliable. But finding one's identity in Christ brings joy, peace, and purpose in life.

Who am I? I belong to God by grace alone, through faith alone, to the glory of Christ alone. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Help youth find their identity in Christ as you connect them to the Prince of Peace.

So… how can we help them to find their identity in Christ? We have to have a relationship with our youth…

3. <u>Connect them to the Pastor of the Pulpit</u>

"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." (2 Timothy 4:2)

"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." (1 Thessalonians 2:8) [31]

"Life together shapes faith more than curricula alone." [32]

Here are some uncomfortable examples of how youth have reached out to me in my ministry…

One young man emailed me, "Subject: Self-Improvement: Hey pastor, It's been brought to my attention by some people really close to me about some stuff I struggle with…" He said he was a jerk and kept telling crude jokes. He wanted to change.

My response: I was proud of him for reaching out. It took a lot of courage. I asked him about his devotional life. I told him to guard what he was watching. (Garbage in; garbage out.) I told him to keep those friends who called him out close. Those are real friends. I told him to pray about it. God promises to give wisdom and help to those who pray for it.

"And finally," I told him, "(...and I saved the best for last...) :) Rejoice that you're forgiven in Christ!! You are redeemed and forgiven! You are perfect in God's sight! You have a clean slate and get to start over again new every day! Rejoice in that truth! Then let it be your motive to live for him in thanks. [33]

And he's not the only one who's reached out to me…

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[29] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys

[30] Ibid.

[31] Sorry I couldn't pick between the two verses. Both are so good, you get two for this section.

[32] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys

[33] There's maybe some overlap here. This one maybe belongs to "Prince of Peace"?

Here are other awkward conversations I've had that have all started with, "Hey pastor, can we talk? I'm struggling…"

- "I'm getting addicted to porn. How can I stop?!"
- "I just found out that my girlfriend has already had sex with someone else… and I was getting ready to propose. Should I call it off?"
- "I don't want kids… ever. But my fiancé does. Should I call off the wedding? Is this a deal breaker?"
- "I am depressed… all of the time. I've taken meds, but they don't seem to help. Do I just have a weak faith? What's wrong with me?!"
- "Is masturbation always wrong? What if there's no porn or lust involved and I'm just exploring my own body?" [34]
- "A friend of the family is married… But he's been hitting on me on Snapchat and Instagram. He's told me how attractive I am… I've blocked him. But what do I do? Should I tell [his wife]?"
- "Pastor… you were right… The wedding is delayed… And if I want to do this right… I have to do it God's way. I'm telling my fiancé that he has to move out." [35]

All of these are real scenarios I've fielded from youth in New Ulm in the eight years I've been serving at St. John's. (All from MVL and MLC students or former students.) "There are a lot of things I still haven't told my parents that I made mistakes about because… they've always been my role models, and if I tell them these things (maybe it's irrational) ... what if you don't like me anymore?" ~ MLC student [36]

But how do youth feel comfortable talking to me, who is not their dad, and, in most cases, not even their pastor, about some of their deepest, darkest secrets… about their insecurities and fears… about things they would never share with their parents or roommates? Because of the position of "pastor," to be sure. (They know that what they say in my office stays in my office.) But it's also because we've built trust with each other. Trust is earned. (And not always easily.) But there are ways that we can ***cultivate*** that trust. Here are my suggestions…

It's been said that we should not be the "Sage on the Stage," but the "Guide by the Side." We need to come alongside our members (young and old) and encourage them, not just as the "expert" who opens up the fire hose of all of our wealth of knowledge and learning, but as a friend.

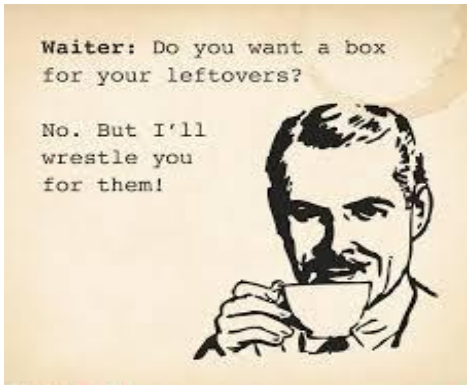
I would argue *against* that sentiment. I would suggest that we need to be ***both***: the "Sage on the Stage" ***and*** the "Guide by the Side." To pick one over the other is a false dichotomy. As I've mentored several young pastors and staff minister interns, I've tried to instill in them this simple maxim: "You have to have something to say ***and*** you have to have someone to say it ***to***." That is, you must know the Word and have something worth saying. But if no one is listening to you, what good is it to know what you know?

So, have something to say. (***Be*** a "Sage on the Stage.") (What good are you if you have close relationships at every level, but your

[34] Asked me by a high school girl. Super awkward. :/
[35] This is a first in my 22-year ministry. Praise God!
[36] Side note: Can we please get a campus pastor at MLC??! Please??!! It will pay huge dividends in the future. I promise. :/

counsel is dumb and you have nothing good to say?) [37] We do that well in our synod. I'm convinced that our pastors, teachers, and staff ministers are the best trained in the world. We know the Word. We know it well. But, we have to have an audience to share the message ***with***. (Be a "Guide on the Side.") (What good are you if you have a world of knowledge, but no one will listen to you, oh, elite scholar?) And how do we do that? How do we gain an audience with the youth? It's all about relationships.

Start at an early age. I drop my kids off at school every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday when I'm already heading in for catechism class. But when I do, I greet kids at the door from 7:40am to 7:55am. Those 15 minutes are an easy investment in connecting to the students and getting to know them. I tell bad dad jokes because humor connects. In fact, a mom from St. John's knows how I use my cheesy humor to connect with the kids. So she bought me a "Bad Dad Joke of the Day" calendar for Christmas. [38]



- "Today at the bank, an old lady asked me to help her check her balance… So I pushed her over."
- "Why can't you hear a pterodactyl go to the bathroom? … Because the 'P' is silent."
- "Where do you find a cow with no legs? In the same place you left it!" [39]
- "I used to wear my watch on my belt. But I don't anymore… that was a waist of time."

They're dumb. I know. But it gets an eye roll from the 7th and 8th graders, a chuckle and a head shake from the 5th and 6th graders, and an LOL from the parents who know that I'm trying to connect with their kids. I do the same on "Treat Tuesdays" at the MLC ECLC and on "Free Coffee Fridays" at St. Paul's Preschool. [40] These events let me release my inner comedian [41] and my "Bad Dad Joke" persona. But more importantly it lets me connect with youth (and their parents). And it builds relationships.

Gentle teasing also helps connect with the students: "What?! You're still wearing a Vikings hat?! You saw how they played, didn't you?! It's time to switch to being a Seahawks fan, isn't it?" [42] "Hey, I don't mean to scare you… but there's a dinosaur on your shirt… he looks like he's about to bite!!"

Greeting at the door with bad dad jokes has had a big impact on my ministry. I've had kids (whom I have no idea what their names are) run up to me at Walmart and give me a hug, to watch their parents look at me with an expression that says, "Who in the world are you?! And why is my kid hugging you?!!" [43] followed by their kid saying, "Mom, dad, this is my pastor!!" [44] Fifteen minutes a day, three days a week matter.

Start young… "Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there." (Matthew 19:13-15)

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[37] ELCA? :/
[38] Shout out to Rachel Lang! Thank you for helping me to connect to your kids and to others!
[39] One kid shouted back, "Ground beef??" :)
[40] I call it "Fri-yay!" because "It's like Friday, but more exciting because it's almost Saturday…!!"
[41] Which isn't really all that funny… so good thing I became a pastor instead.
[42] I grew up in the Seattle area. Go Hawks!
[43] The parents give me the "Stranger Danger" look… And understandably. "Who ***is*** this guy?!"
[44] And we're okay again: parents and me.

Or as one MLC student put it, "[Relationship] starts with having a lot more touch points when they're as young as possible making your face almost like one of the family's…"

Get to know their names, so you're not like me, thinking, "Who is this kid who's hugging me in Walmart?!" Study the directories. Between the Martin Luther College Early Child Learning Center, the St. Paul's Preschool and St. Paul's K-8 students, the Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School students, and the Martin Luther College students, there are literally hundreds (maybe thousands) of names for me to try to remember. [45]

I will admit that I'm not great at it, but I try. [46] And I've learned to be comfortable with saying, "I know I should know your name by now… but please forgive me and tell me again… What's your name?" [47] Pastor Bovee does the same, "I'm terrible at names, tell me yours again?" People are usually gracious, "No worries, Pastor. We know how many people you have to keep track of." While it is hard to learn names, with so many names, at so many levels, and takes work, it's worth it! [48]

Then at the grade school I try to do weekly "Pastor Questions." I go from room to room [49] and ask them, "Do you have any questions about the Bible that a pastor can answer?" They are sometimes goofy: Q: "How tall was Jesus?" (A: "Over 2 feet tall.") Q: "How old was Peter?" (A: "He was about two years old (and nine months) on his second birthday.") Q: "How many dogs were on the ark?" (A: "At least two.") Others are more insightful for grade schoolers. Q: "What if Adam and Eve didn't sin?" Q: "Can you explain the symbolism of the tabernacle?" Q: "How do we know Jesus really rose from the dead?" But these "Pastor Rounds" not only invite questions, growth, and learning, they also cultivate trust and build relationships.

So start young. "[Relationship] starts with having a lot more touch points when they're as young as possible making your face almost like one of the family…" ~ MLC student

As you do these simple things of getting to know the kids [50] …you will cultivate trust. You know the formula: "Patience + Time + Effort = Trust." And "Sin and Struggles + Trust (in you) + Vulnerability + More Trust [51] = Opportunities to share the comfort of the gospel." And that's what we're all about.

But if it's "Patience + Time + Effort = Trust," then this won't happen overnight. Mike Rowe of "Dirty Jobs" said in an interview about President Trump's State of the Union Address, "[Trust is] not a flip being switched. It's a drip… drip… drip… It's a frog in the boiling water…" [52]

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[45] Not to mention about 1,000 members at St. John's and another 2,000 members at St. Paul's. :/

[46] Substitute teaching helps. I don't know that I'm technically qualified to teach 5th and 6th grade math anymore. But I figure the teachers can fix whatever problems I create. And they seem to appreciate a free sub while I appreciate a day of getting to know the kids better.

[47] No one has really gotten mad at me for saying that (except for my wife). :/

[48] One hero of mine at this skill is Jenny. She's in charge of the cafeteria at St. Paul's Lutheran School. I've heard that for the first three or four weeks of school she makes the kids tell her their name before they get lunch. And I believe she is the only one in our school, of all the teachers, pastors, custodians, and principal who actually knows the name of every single student in our school. Jenny is great at this.

[49] Kindergarten through 6th grade… I assume the other pastors are connecting with their 7th and 8th grade catechumens.

[50] And I will admit, I have to study directories to learn kids' (and parents') names. It's harder than learning Greek or Hebrew vocables to me. But it's time well spent: "Have something to say, ***and*** have an audience to say it to." Study both the languages and the directories. It's not an either-or, but a both and: Be a sage on the stage ***and*** a guide by the side.

[51] …as you listen and help and don't just judge…

[52] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o5XCmzkL4g

Take your time. But ***put in*** the time. Send an email on their birthdays. Send a care package at Thanksgiving. Snail mail a card letting them know you're praying for them. Take them to coffee or lunch over Spring Break or Summer Vacation. Snapchat. Facebook. Instagram. [53] And know that it does take time. Some students have only opened up to me about their struggles four years into our relationship.

Take out your teens for sugary coffee drinks or ice cream in the summer. I try to take my youth out to coffee, breakfast, or lunch, between their freshman and sophomore years of high school [54] and between their freshman and sophomore years of college. Those seem to be formative years for youth, and I want to be there for them, at least to let them know that I care about them… their career decisions, their budding romances, their struggles and their pains.

The old maxim is true: "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care." And it seems to apply to pretty much everyone of every age. But perhaps it applies more to our youth. One MLC student put it this way: "Going to your students' events builds trust because they know that you care and that you're going to ask them about their personal life and not just ask them about how they are feeling about the stuff we're learning in school?"

Invite some college kids to talk over pizza and dessert. Do what you can to cultivate trust. [55] After the focus panel with the MLC students, one of them said, "Listen to us! That's how you build trust!" And another added, "Let's do this [the panel discussion] again!" (A few pizzas and a case of soda is a small price to pay to listen, learn, and engender trust in your students. But… it's more than pizza and Mountain Dew… more on that in a minute…)

One MLC student in my focus group put it well: "[Don't just know] the names of the youth but *[care] about them*, [show] up to their events and really [consider] the ministry of presence as an important thing. When you know them and care about them, they will know and care about *you*. This relationship then will give you windows to talk about God and naturally will bring movement closer." [56]

And Mike Wiechmann gave me this good reminder: "Be authentic and [be] yourself. Don't forget what it's like to be a kid." Don't fake it. Kids sniff out inauthenticity and hypocrisy. Be real. Be yourself. But be caring. That will build trust to keep you connected to them. [57]

I try to take my four boys out for a quarterly "Dad Date." [58] They hate the term. They think it sounds creepy like I'm trying to date them. But I tell them that that's not what "date" means. It means you put this date on the calendar and guard this time for a person you care about. Kids spell trust: "T-I-M-E."

Then remember things. One student told me, "You always bring up what we talked about 6 months ago when we met for coffee. That shows me that you remember and genuinely care about me. You don't just say 'Hi!' in the back of church. You remember me." Take notes when you meet with them and put those notes in your Google calendar. (It's searchable.) [59]

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[53] All three of those are verbs now. Or maybe it's "Snap, Face, and Insta?" I don't know. I'm not that hip. Ask a young person.

[54] Especially those away at Luther Prep. I see my MVL students every Sunday, but not my preppies.

[55] Buying them food always seems to help. :)

[56] Another MLC student added, "I'm just going to use Professor Smith as an example. He goes to all of his kids' stuff that he can. Somebody sent the video [he took] of [his son] playing basketball and being a proud parent. We see that as students… You're more likely to trust someone if you see them showing up and providing for the people that are really important in their lives, then they're more likely to also show up for you as well."

[57] Cf. How to Have an Honest Conversation That Might Be Uncomfortable https://danreiland.com/how-to-have-an-honest-conversation-that-might-be-uncomfortable/

[58] You can find my "Dad Date" agenda in the appendices.

[59] Full disclosure: I ***don't*** have a great memory. But I do take good notes. I search my emails from a student before I meet with him or her. I have Google Spreadsheet for prayer requests. And I set reminders to review them regularly. Set up systems to help you remember what you said to whom. Review them. It sends the message that you genuinely care.

The old Evangelism acronym comes into play with the youth as much as it does with anyone else: S.A.L.T.: "S" = start the conversation. One MLC student told me, "It's important for pastors or just the church in general to reach out to people. My church has called me three times in the past two years, just checking in on me. Obviously, my situation is different: 'I'm doing my religion homework while you're calling me.' But I have some friends that have gone to the cities for college or out of state. It's like they don't really have any connection to the church, because no one's reaching out to them…"

"A" = ask questions. Then "L" = listen. Then… [60] Listen some more. "Instead of judging or criticizing, churches should make a genuine effort to understand the issues and challenges facing young people today. This involves listening to them and engaging in open conversations to help them feel known, accepted, and valued." [61] Then, listen some more. [62] Then (and only then) you can "T" = tell them something and mentor them.

Whatever it takes, however it works for you and your personality, in a non-creepy way, learn how to cultivate trust. "***Cultivate Trust: Create safe, authentic relationships*** where students can be real about doubts, fears, and questions." [63] (also, every student I talked to…) … (emphasis mine) ...

4. <u>Connect them to the Proofs of the Passion</u>

"After that, [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."
(1 Corinthians 15:6)

So… "Cultivate Trust: Create safe, authentic relationships…" But keep the goal in mind: "***where students can be real about doubts, fears, and questions.***" [64] (also, every student I talked to…) … (emphasis mine)...

- "Everybody is going to doubt their faith at one point in time. No one goes through their entire life without ever having any questions or doubts; so when you have those questions, it's important to be connected to a church and to a pastor who can answer the questions."
- "Each generation has their own issues. Know what those are. Listen. Don't hide from the difficult conversations."
- "People are too scared to hurt other people's feelings nowadays. Anything you say will be taken in a negative way by someone in your life… and so that's why people shut down about [certain] topics… because I don't want to lose a friend or create an enemy. Cancel culture affects this generation."
  ~ MLC students

It goes back to "Have something to say and have someone to say it to." Have someone to say it to: Be an approachable pastor. Get to know your youth. Care for them and show them that you care. Start cultivating trust when they're young; build relationships with them. But then… you also have to have something to say to them.

We're doing a great job of this in the WELS. We teach the Word which has all the answers that we need. But we should also be ready to answer their unanswered questions. We should have an answer ready for their

[60] And this is the hard part for me as an extrovert and a talker…
[61] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church
[62] Then repeat the "Ask" and "Listen" steps a few more times…
[63] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys
[64] Ibid.

doubts. Be ready for the tough questions on homosexuality, masturbation, George Floyd, and ICE. But especially be ready for the tough questions of "How do we know Jesus really rose?" "How do we know the Bible is true?" "How do I know *you're* telling me the truth?!"

It's my personal opinion that we should do a better job of teaching our kids apologetics so we can answer their "doubts, fears, and questions." Since the attacks on the World Trade Centers on 9/11/2001, I believe satan [65] overplayed his hand. Like in the Screwtape Letters where screwtape reminds wormwood that killing people is not the goal; claiming their souls is… satan killed thousands, but it backfired. I remember after the attacks the churches being full. Tens of thousands of people who had never stepped foot in a church came for the first time. Tens of thousands of people who had left the church came *back*.

But there was another greater benefit that God worked through that tragic event: There has been a huge resurgence in Christian apologetics since then. The "new atheists" started their aggressive attack against all religions, including Christianity. And Christians have had to defend the challenge: "See! This is the result of religion!" And, in my humble opinion, they've stepped up admirably. We have so many more resources to answer the questions that atheists and skeptics ask than I did when I was a teen (and had many of the same questions). [66] Let's use them! [67] [68] [69] [70]

When I have a little bit of time left in my catechism class (we meet for an hour, three days a week) I pull out a game called "Talking Point." I give each student a card, face down. Then one by one they flip the card over and answer the question on the card. They center around their faith and living out their faith. Once that student answers, the whole class discusses it. Then we move on to the next card. It's a way to practice talking about difficult topics in view of God's Word and for me to guide them in that. [71] Here are some examples:

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[65] My mom, a retired WELS school teacher, still gets mad at me for not capitalizing "satan" since it's a proper noun as a name. My rebuttal: I refuse to give him the dignity. And I still haven't capitalized "satan" in any of my print, online or on paper, since I've been a pastor. :) (Sorry, mom, not sorry.) :/

[66] I pretty much had Josh McDowell, C.S. Lewis, and Frank Morrison. I believe that those three men saved me from satan's attacks and my own doubts in my teen years. But now we have William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, John Lennox, Alister McGrath, Alvin Plantinga, Frank Turek, Daniel B. Wallace, N.T. Wright, the sainted Charlie Kirk, AnswersinGenesis.org, and so many more resources! Go check them out!

[67] If anyone is interested, I've written a course I now teach my eight graders called "I Apologize." I have a rudimentary answer key written too for a few who have asked for it. I'm happy to share it. Just email me. One of the resources I now use as required reading is a book called, "Why Trust the Bible?" We also watch "The Week that Changed the World" a 30-minute video with a concise apologetic.

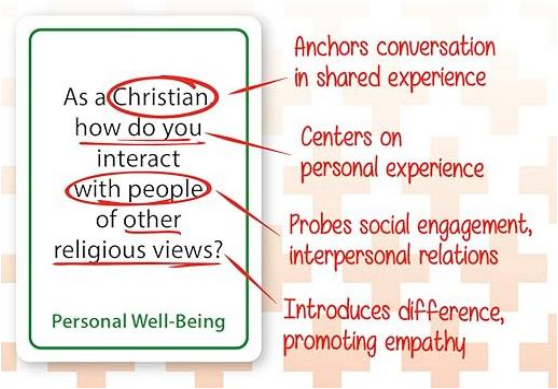
[68] Fun story with "Why Trust the Bible?" I emailed the publisher to ask if I could get a case discount. They gave me 20% and free shipping when they heard why I wanted it; as required reading for my 8th graders. Then the CEO saw the request and generously donated a second case. He shared that I was making my 8th graders read the book at a board meeting and the CFO wanted in on it too and send me a third case of the book. Now, storage is a bigger issue than cost. :)

[69] "The Week that Changed the World" is produced by "Boettcher + Trinklein Television," the same group who made "Road to Emmaus," "My Son, My Savior," Come, Follow Me," and "To the Ends of the Earth." It's just not advertised much in our circles because Dr. Maier, the narrator, is LCMS, not WELS.

[70] http://theweekthatchangedtheworld.com or search for it on YouTube. It's free there.

[71] Note: There's also a "Family" version, a "Teen" version, a "Kids" version, and a "Generations" version.

- "How have you seen God answer prayer?"
- "What is your favorite way to connect with God (prayer, reading, singing)? Why?"
- "Which book of the Bible would you like to learn more about? Why?"
- "As a Christian how do you interact with people of other religious views?"



The goal here is to "Teach in a way that ***trans****forms*, not just ***in****forms*." [72] My goal is to not just be the "Sage on the Stage, but also the Guide by the Side" and help them to become critical thinkers, not just passive recipients of the fire hose of knowledge I hit them with. [73]

"Churches [should] focus on the genuine, life-changing message of Jesus rather than promoting a 'moralistic therapeutic deism'. This involves welcoming young people into a Jesus-centered way of life that is authentic and meaningful." [74]

In short, doctrine matters. Apologetics are important. A sacramental life will help them grow. Don't just give them pizza, Mountain Dew, and some games. "Many youth ministries are strong socially but fall short in helping teens make sense of faith in everyday life. Discipleship should be continuous and deeply integrated into identity—not just a stage of life." [75]

"Cultivate Trust: Create safe, authentic relationships ***[so that]*** students can be real about doubts, fears, and questions." [76] (also, every student I talked to…) … Have someone to say it to, but have something worthwhile to say. [77] Strengthen their faith by connecting youth to the proofs of the Passion.

5. Connect them to the People of the Pew

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42)

- "Teens are more connected to their phones than they are to their friends and family today."
- "Church is out of touch."
- "We need more intergenerational ministries."
  ~ MLC students

"Faith that sticks is formed in relationships, not programs." [78] And that's not just with the pastor. That's with the members of the church too.

Let's hear from our esteemed synod president again: [79] "Addressing that problem is a congregational effort. Parents need to continue setting an example of regular worship and encouraging their young adult

[72] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys
[73] Just kidding; I'm not that smart. I just read a lot and regurgitate what I read.
[74] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church
[75] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys
[76] Ibid.
[77] Check out WELS "Youth Ministry Modules" for some things to say: https://welscongregationalservices.net/modules/youth-ministry-modules/
[78] Raising Emotionally Strong Boys
[79] See how I keep name dropping to try and gain credibility?

children to be faithful in their worship and active in church activities. ***Congregations can find ways to include young people in the life and worship and work of the congregation and invite them individually to participate***. **Adult members can take the time to get to know the young people in the congregation, showing interest in their joys and challenges and offering encouragement and advice. Spiritual leaders can strive to offer Bible classes for young people that not only dig more deeply into God's Word but also provide practical guidance in applying scriptural truth to their lives at a time when everything they believe will be under attack."** [80]

Youth want their own space. But they also want to be included. So, how can we connect youth to not just the pastor of the pulpit, but to the people of the pew? If they only have a relationship with one lead figure in the congregation, will that be enough to keep them around??

In Kenai, Alaska we offered a tuition discount for our school to all who took the Bible Information Class. [81] I insisted members take it too if they wanted the discount. At first, they (the members) didn't like that policy. But I explained that a refresher was good for them ***and*** I wanted non-members to make connections with existing members so the new members weren't ***just*** connected to the pastor. It worked. Long-time members encouraged new members. And community was built. I told my long-time members, "I want to incentivize your outreach efforts and engagement with non-members just as much as I incentivize the BIC for non-members." [82]

What I say of non-WELS parents is equally applicable to the youth of the church. They need to have "mentors" "adopting" them at church so that they're connected to more people than just the pastor and community is built. Pastors come and go. (Calls happen.) But a lot of members stay for decades. How can we build a few intergenerational ministries?

"Young people are often more drawn to a warm, relational community than to flashy programs or worship services… [Foster] intergenerational friendships where older members invest in relationships with younger people." [83]

Church picnics [84], Lenten suppers, and Easter breakfasts, Sunday School programs and Vacation Bible Schools and Soccer Camps all connect one generation to another in a way that doesn't necessarily happen on a Sunday morning. But could we do a better job of intentionally connecting intergenerationally?

Youth are (and everyone else is) hungering and thirsting for genuine relationship. That was a takeaway from every book that I read and every conversation that I had. "[Youth] are hungering and thirsting for genuine relationship. Intergenerational friendships are rare. Spend time with them. Love is spelled T-I-M-E for our youth." [85] In what ways can we spend more time with our youth? In what ways can we create space for others of different generations to spend time with the youth? How can we connect our youth with the people of the pew?

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[80] WELS President, Mark Schroeder, in a March 2026 *Forward in Christ* article entitled "Hold on to What You Have."
[81] It wasn't based on membership, but on completion of the BIC for non-members and members alike.
[82] Cf. the appendices for my proposal if you're interested.
[83] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church
[84] Ours is held at the feet of Herman the German.
[85] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church

One member received this letter from a young friend after her elderly mother had gone to glory: "I have very vivid memories of seeing your mom at church every Sunday. She even crocheted a cross for me when I got confirmed. I still have it! And best of all—she wrote me letters when I went to college. I loved getting mail! Your Mom was a gem! … She was truly one of the kindest and most thoughtful Christians I have ever known… I cannot even begin to count the times when her card arrived at 'just the right time' with 'just the right words' to brighten my day. I was honored to know your mom and to be her friend. With love and deepest sympathy."

What an impact this woman left on the generation behind her! Intergenerational friendships in church clearly leave a long-lasting impact!

An MLC student wise beyond years said: "I read this book [which] talked about a program that one church had called under-shepherding… When a new family would come in, they'd assign someone from the congregation to build a relationship with them. First, go eat at the [sponsor's] house, then go eat at the [new member's] house, and just connect people together. I wonder if there isn't a way where we could do that with youth where you could have a mentor-mentee relationship and bring them to Bible class."

Another student said, "Model the faith life: ***It's hard to be what you can't see***." Connect youth to the church by connecting them to the people of the pew.

"What if someone like a Called worker or an elder, or somebody at church says, 'Let's go do this bowling activity together?' It doesn't even have to be related to church at all, but we're building relationships, because that's what's going to bring them back." [86]

Building relationships is what it's all about. Let's help our youth connect to the people of the pew with relationships at the church.

6. <u>Connect them to their Purpose of Pentecost</u>

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39)

"We need more service opportunities." ~ MLC student.

I find this quote a bit ironic because St. John's already has its Sunday School pretty much run by MLC students. MLC students play handbells, sing in the choir, and play instruments for worship. MLC students assist with our YouTube streaming, with slide advancing, and with communion distribution. And most months (except for when students are gone for school breaks) we have lay lectors; MLC junior and senior pastor track students read the lessons for worship.

[86] A shout out to my member Joyce DeForge who this comment was made about, who regularly drives MLC students to the airport from NU to MPS, who invites them to go bowling with her or to an OWLS event, who picks them up from campus to bring them to church, and who invites students to just sit and have coffee with her in the MLC cafeteria.

But… “We need more service opportunities.” ~ MLC student. And “Teach teenagers that life is not just about *them* it's about *service*.” ~ Another MLC student. [87]

Growing up as a preteen and teen my concerns were primarily making curfew on time without getting into trouble, “Does this girl like me? How can I get her to?!” and (still) “What new Nintendo game just came out?” As a preteen I was trusted to bike literally miles away from home as long as I got home on time. As a teen I drove my car to the houses of friends who lived over an hour away. [88] I had good friends (for the most part) and my parents trusted them implicitly. [89] And as long as I put a quarter in the payphone to let Mom know I was going to be a few hours late, she was cool with it. But ***trust was extended***. And I felt more grown up when it was.

Extend trust to the youth of the church and “give them the keys.”

A young man [90] was learning how to drive. He mistook the gas pedal for the brake pedal… in his driveway. He drove through the garage door doing minor damage to the vehicle, but major damage to the garage. It cost his dad [91] about $2,000 to repair the garage door. But his dad gave his kid the keys the next week and said, “You need to get back on the road driving. Get back up on the horse. Don’t let this cripple you. You got this.” That moment (coupled with dad not caring *that much* about a $2,000 repair) helped father and son bond. And helped build his son’s confidence. [92] [93]

Give the kids the keys. Give them the keys to the church. [94] Let them take over. Let them be in charge. Let them usher. Let them advance slides. Let them stream the service. Could we even dare to let them make some of the decisions sitting on a board? They may not always get it right. [95]

But here’s the advice of Mike Wiechman: “Ask them and trust them. If something gets messed up, realize that this is part of learning and it is ok if not everything is perfect. Don't have the overreaching parent fix everything they do.” [96]

One student said, “I might be interested in this, but then I never actually go to it because… I'm either scared or have other priorities, but if someone actually reached out to me…” Reach out to them. Ask. And to us, as pastors, one student said, “Have the ***pastor*** [invite] them [to serve] personally… *My mom* has relayed information… ‘Hey, do you guys want to do this?’ ‘Um… Not really.’ When it comes from a parent it feels like a chore, but when it comes from somebody in the church… I would [be] more inclined to say, ‘yes.’” Ask them. Invite them. They want that more than your 70+ crowd who wearily tell you, “Okay… I’ll serve again… But isn’t it time for the next generation to take over?”

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[87] These are smart kids, aren’t they? I *still* think that life is just about me… far too often. :/

[88] I did go to Evergreen Lutheran High School and traffic sometimes meant that an hour drive was 30 miles away…

[89] Not always rightly so. :/

[90] Who shall remain nameless to protect his identity…

[91] Who will also remain nameless…

[92] And I now know who his high school crush is because we bonded over that moment of total forgiveness without judgment… er… I mean ***that kid’s dad*** now knows…

[93] Plus, that kid’s dad (who will still remain nameless… We have identities and reputations to protect here, people!) may have had an accident or two when he was first learning to drive. Maybe… who’s to say?

[94] My Staff Minister Intern, who shall also remain nameless to protect his identity, has an actual key to St. John’s Lutheran Church. I trust him. Extend that trust to your youth.

[95] At least not to ***your*** standards…

[96] MVL art teacher, St. John’s Youth Group Leader, sage.

On March 28th, two young ladies (still in college) ran our Easter for Kids. They organized. They coordinated. They found the volunteers. They ran the whole thing. I didn't even show up. [97] Did everything go perfectly? (Well… yes, actually. They did a better job than I would have done had I been there.) But even if I had been there, extending trust made them feel like more of a part of the congregation. I'm super proud of them. And I'm confident that those two will stay connected to the church. [98]

"Give them the keys." Trust them and get them involved in service. They want to prove that they're adults (or on the verge of adulthood). Let them! Enlist them as greeters, ushers, lay lectors, musicians, Sunday school teachers… Let them serve in the choir, let them ring the handbells, let them run the "VBS" or "Easter for Kids" (with your support), give them service projects, let them rake leaves or shovel snow for the elderly, let them serve a midweek service meal. Encourage students to go on Project Timothy Trips or Daylight Trips [99] They want to do it and they will step up.

From another MLC student: "Give out more roles dedicated to youth… Keep them integrated… have more service projects that they can help with. More volunteer work… I remember raking for elderly people… doing more things will keep the youth active."

They want more than just pizza and Mountain Dew on a Wednesday night. They want to feel needed. And they ***are*** needed! There are many roles that our youth can fill in the church. And they want to fill those roles. So ask them and trust them.

"Churches should move away from centralized authority and instead empower young people by giving them meaningful leadership roles. This means entrusting them with significant responsibilities, not just involving them in token ways." [100]

"Growing young churches avoid condemning the outside world and instead help young people engage in meaningful service. They focus on being a positive presence in the local and global community. Help them to help others. Acts of service is meaningful work. Don't just make it about fun. Make it about service. They secretly long for it. We have ways of giving it." [101]

Give them something to do. Give them something meaningful that shows them that they are valued. They are wanted. They have purpose.

Get the youth involved. Hand them the keys. Trust them. Will they always get it right? Maybe not. [102] We have a lot of grade schoolers advancing the PowerPoint® slides in our worship services. They don't do it perfectly. They goof up from time to time. [103]

We have a lot of high schoolers serving as greeters and ushers. Are they awkward? Sometimes. But they're learning. And they're getting better at it. And they're proud to serve their church and their Savior. They're taking ownership of *their* church. So the risk is worth the

[97] I bailed on them to move my dad into his new memory care unit. I wasn't there, but by all accounts, they were amazing!
[98] And both of their brothers are ushers. So I'm not worried about them either.
[99] What we used to call Travel Canvass Witnessing in my day… but which were instrumental in my decision to become a pastor. I thought, "Hey, this isn't as hard as I thought it would be. In fact, it's fun to talk about my faith! Let's do this!"
[100] Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church
[101] Ibid.
[102] They might drive through the garage door.
[103] Especially when their pastors are so enthralling that they focus on what's being said more than on the slides they're supposed to be advancing… or maybe they're just thinking about a boy or girl in the pew in front of them, or about lunch, or about the video game they want to get home to. There's no way to really know. So I'm assuming the former.

reward: a new generation of Christians actively serving their church, growing in their faith, and serving their Savior.

The WELS has recently adopted a new long-range strategic plan, "Christ Through Us," which runs from 2025 to 2035. This plan focuses on shifting from "corporate outreach" to personal witnessing and emphasizes that "every member—***including youth***—is an ambassador for Christ." (emphasis mine)

"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12) Paul didn't wait for Timothy to be "ready" or "old enough." He brought him into the mission field immediately. "Take them along in the work of the church." [104]

Youth aren't just practicing to be leaders *someday*; they are called to serve *now*. [105] So let's "give them the keys." Trust them (in appropriate ways). Connect them to service opportunities (the purpose of Pentecost) and watch them bloom and flourish.

7. <u>Connect them to their Peers and Parents</u>

"We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord… which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children." (Psalm 78:4-7)

Let's go back to that young man who had the courage to email me. He only did so because his friends called him out for being a jerk. Remember my advice? Here's the full quote:

"Ask those close to you who brought this to your attention to keep calling you out. Ask them to hold you accountable and let you know when you cross the line. They obviously care about you enough to call you out. Those are good friends. Those are the kind you want to keep. Keep them *close*!"

"It's maybe not the pastor [with the answers]… There [are] other people your age. I've received encouragement from other guys in my grade…" ~ MLC student

This is where youth group and intergenerational ministries and "give them the keys" and connection with a pastor all come into play: Surround our youth with people that care about them and their faith and ***show*** that they care about them and their faith. Ministry is relational. It always has been. God designed us to need each other, to rely on each other, and to *help* each other. [106]

The ones who isolate are the ones who struggle most. You've seen this in your own circuits, haven't you? Who struggles most? Those pastors who don't come to circuit meetings or conferences. Those who don't surround themselves with brothers who will not just call them out, but will also encourage them, pray for them, and share a fitting word from *God's* Word with them.

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[104] "WELS Mission Journeys" motto re: the youth of the church.

[105] I've often heard the sentiment "The youth are the future of our church!" answered with, "NO! The youth are our church right now!" Let's get them involved right now (in appropriate ways).

[106] I also have a Bible study on the topic of all of the "Each Other" and "One Another" verses in the New Testament. Let me know if you're interested. I'll send it your way. (pastorguenther@gmail.com)

The same is true with our youth. They need a "Band of Brothers," (we all do). Prep Schools and Area Lutheran High Schools, youth groups and Sunday school classes have a way of connecting Christian friends to one another. And if you don't have those available to you in your area, might I suggest you take a few youth out to lunch together? Form your own focus group. Listen to what they have to say. But maybe at the same time, you're also helping them to connect to each other. Sure, lunch is going to cost you. But it's an investment, not an expense.

"In high school most influence comes from your peers… because of peer pressure because of things they're doing." (MLC student) Another said, "It takes a friend to say, 'Hey, come to the basketball game with me.' 'Hey, let's go to this dance!' …[for me to go.]"

But it's not just friends. It's still ***mostly*** parents…

- "A big thing is getting their parents involved. If you don't have modeling from their parents, [it's] not going to rub off on them."
- "It would be great for high schoolers who are still at home to watch their parents help in church too."
- "[Model it.] It's a lot about what you do in the house before they get out of the house… like devotions, prayers at night, at any time. Little things that become an everyday thing (that they might not enjoy every time), when they leave the house [and] start to have kids and then do that with *their* kids, it just keeps growing… It's a habit."
- As a kid, I didn't always want to go to Sunday school… when I hit fifth grade is when I was starting to [dislike] Sunday school. But my parents always made me… [Looking back], I'm very glad that I stayed in Sunday School, but at the time, I didn't like it." [107]
- "I have two friends that went to public college. But their parents were very good about going to church every weekend. We still talk about [religious] stuff. It never left them. They had all the struggles of surrounding friends, but they still had their strong faith because of their parents."
  ~ MLC students.

"Youth stay connected when parents are equipped and expected to disciple—not just drop kids at youth group." [108] "A parent's positive influence on a child's faith development dwarfs all other influences." [109]

One of my eighth graders wisely said, "You know… honestly Pastor… it doesn't really matter what you or the elders of the church do if our parents don't take us to church and model it for us themselves. They have the most influence over us; always will." [110]

So the prayers in our new hymnal are fitting: "Keep our children in the grace of their baptisms. Enable their parents to train them in lives of faith." [111] "Help parents to grasp the eternal value of keeping their children close to Jesus all their lives." [112] And, "Instill in the hearts of our children a desire to follow you as they prepare for future days. Help them distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and

[107] Cf. the "Drug Problem" in the appendices.
[108] The Family-Friendly Church by Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Again, cf. the "Drug Problem" in the appendices. Seriously; it's a really good article… Read it.
[111] Christian Worship; Service Setting **One**, pg. 164.
[112] Christian Worship; Service Setting **Two**, pg. 182.

lasting joy. Encourage more young people to prepare for service in the public ministry of the gospel. Move us to pray for these brothers and sisters and to help when we can." [113] [114]

Let's hear from our esteemed synod president once more: "Addressing that problem is a congregational effort. ***Parents need to continue setting an example of regular worship and encouraging their young adult children to be faithful in their worship and active in church activities.***" [115]

And "Lack of authentic faith at home is [detrimental to growth]. Kids sniff out hypocrisy." ~ MLC student

And, "More is caught than taught so parents nurturing their own faith is an important step." ~ Mike Wiechmann

So… how do we equip parents? Connect them (***the parents***) to the Prince of Peace. Connect them (***the parents***) to the pastor of the pulpit. (Go take ***them*** out to lunch.) Connect them to the "Proofs of the Passion," (they have tough questions too…), to the "People of the Pew," (parents are also longing for community…), and to the "Purpose of Pentecost," (get them involved as greeters and ushers).

Then watch their kids do the same!

We had a moms' Bible study based on "Mama Bear Apologetics" to help equip moms to answer their kids' tough questions themselves. [116] Engage the parents. Connect with them. Email them on their birthdays, on their anniversaries, and on their kids' birthdays. But perhaps this all boils down to: Elder work. Delinquent parents will likely (except by the grace of God) lead to delinquent children. Active parents will more likely lead to active children.

Parent's attendance, and particularly ***dad's*** attendance, is a pretty good indicator of kids' attendance. No wonder God said, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4) [117] One book said that these were the four keys to keeping kids connected to Christ: "The four practices: 1) talking about faith with your mother, 2) talking about faith with your father, 3) having family devotions or prayer, 4) doing family projects to help other people." [118]

So let's do all we can to connect our youth to their peers and to their parents.

Conclusion

Let's do all we can to…

1) Connect to Pre-Adult Problems
2) Connect them to the Prince of Peace
3) Connect them to the Pastor of the Pulpit
4) Connect them to the Proofs of the Passion
5) Connect them to the People of the Pew
6) Connect them to the Purpose of Pentecost
7) Connect them to their Peers and Parents

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[113] Christian Worship; Service Setting **Three**, pg. 198.

[114] And my own boys have shared with me how much they appreciate the phrase "***Demolish*** our doubts" in the same prayer. That's powerful language for a generation struggling with a lot of doubts.

[115] WELS President, Mark Schroeder, in a March 2026 *Forward in Christ* article entitled "Hold on to What You Have."

[116] Mama Bear Apologetics: Empowering Your Kids to Challenge Cultural Lies by Hillary Morgan Ferrer

[117] And, interestingly, where NIV11 wanted to make most passage gender neutral, they left this one "fathers" instead of "parents."

[118] I'm sorry. I lost the reference on this one. I wish I had it.

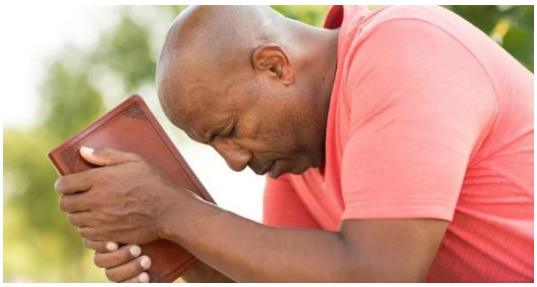
I began this paper standing in front of my "confirmation wall." How many of you could walk your "confirmation wall" and tell the same story? But those photos that I stare at (especially the two pictures that include two of my own sons) aren't the whole story. It's not just about what happened that day. It's about where they are now, years later. Some are still in the pew. Some are wandering. Sadly, some may be lost, and we pray that they will someday return. But our task is not to guarantee outcomes. Our task is to faithfully preach and teach the truths of God's Word – placing Christ crucified before their "eyes" again and again – letting the Holy Spirit work when and where he will. Even the most faithful pastor does not guarantee retention. Faith – and the retention of faith – is the work of the Holy Spirit. But God uses means to do that. And he calls us to use those means as we serve the youth.

We are called to speak confidence into their confusion, to teach them their identity against their anxiety, to build relationships that open doors to speak the gospel, to build communities where they can land when feeling isolated, to give them meaning and purpose so they know they are cared for and needed. In other words, we're called to be faithful leaving the results to God.

But we do our work with confidence that of those pictures on the wall, God, by his grace will bring some (hopefully many) into his eternal fold. We do our work with the confidence that many will still hear the Word, believe God's promises, and join us in glory for all of eternity.

8. (Bonus Section) Continue to Pray for Your People

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." (James 5:16)



Finally, pray for the youth of our church. "The prayer of a righteous person ***is*** powerful and effective." (James 5:16) Through Christ and his work for us, that's each one of us: a righteous person. Our prayers are *powerful* and *effective*. Let's pray for our youth. My in-laws pray daily for my boys… ***and*** for my boys' future *wives* every day. [119] Prayer should not be a footnote. [120] Pray regularly for your pre-teens and your teens, for your youth group, and for your twenty-somethings. Pray for them individually (at least on their birthdays and anniversaries). [121] I'm convinced that our prayers have a much greater impact than we realize. So pray for them.

And to that end… I suggest we close the paper (before we begin our open discussion)... in prayer. This is the excellent prayer form Christian Worship, Service Setting 3, abbreviated and adapted…

Loving God and Lord,

Instill in the hearts of our children a desire to follow you as they prepare for future days. Help them distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and lasting joy. Encourage more young people to prepare for service in the public ministry of the gospel. Move us to pray for these brothers and sisters and to help when we can. Hear us, Lord, as we pray in silence [for a specific young person or for several young people in our lives]...

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[119] I wish that was something that I thought of first. But I'm grateful for great in-laws!

[120] Or a "Bonus Section." I'm sorry. I didn't know how else to work it in.

[121] Create a Google calendar called "Birthdays and Anniversaries." Have your administrative assistant help set it up. It's an investment of time and an investment in souls.

[Silent prayer] … Whether we pray together or alone, you have promised to hear and answer us. Give us patience to accept your blessings in whatever way you send them. In your love and wisdom, prepare us for the day when you will take us to be with you forever. Hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

~ SDG

Pastor Rob Guenther
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Questions for Discussion: [122]

- What do you see as the biggest challenges to connecting with youth? Time? Culture? [123] Desire?
- What do you see as the biggest needs of youth these days?
- How can we as pastors better help youth (and everyone) find their identity in Christ?
- How can we as pastors better connect to the youth of our churches?
- How can we better teach apologetics (or just prepare our youth spiritually for the world ahead)?
- How can we better encourage Christian youth to encourage each other?
- How can we better encourage Christian parents to encourage their youth?
- What do you do in your current culture / context to connect with youth that we could learn from?
- What is your biggest prayer for our youth right now?
- How can I better pray for you and your youth?

Bibliography and Resources:

- Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church ($13 @ Amazon)
- Raising Emotionally Strong Boys: Tools Your Son Can Build On for Life ($10 @ Amazon)
- Faith Beyond Youth Group: Five Ways to Form Character and Cultivate Lifelong Discipleship ($18 @ Amazon)
- Who Am I? Understanding Your Identity In Christ Through Facts Not Feelings ($20 @ NPH)
- The Family Friendly Church ($23.50 @ Amazon)
- Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People ($9.50 @ Amazon)
- Christ-Esteem: Where the Search for Self-esteem Ends ($8 @ Amazon)
- Man Up, Josiah! Advice on Being a Godly Man ($5.50 @ Amazon)
- Taboo: Topics Christians Should Be Talking about but Don't ($19 @ Amazon)
- welscongregationalservices.net/modules/youth-ministry-modules/
- https://forwardinchrist.net/parents/ (Free)
    - https://forwardinchrist.net/family-friendly-church/
- https://bit.ly/DadDate
- Why Trust the Bible? ($4.25 @ Amazon)
- http://theweekthatchangedtheworld.com (Or search for it on YouTube. It's free there.)
- I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist ($13 @ Amazon)
- Talking Point: Christian Edition ($40 @ Amazon)
- Mama Bear Apologetics ($10 @ Amazon)

[122] I'm definitely no expert in this subject, so I'm looking to learn from you just as much as I have presented to you…
[123] "Six Seven!!!" "That's bussin'!" "Locked in!" "Aura!" "Drip!" "Cookin'!" and "Cooked!" And of course, "I got rizz!"

Credits: *Special thanks to…*

- Thanks to Mike Wiechmann and Kris Kuschel, to Eli and Emma Dorn (youth group leaders at St. John's Lutheran and St. Paul's Lutheran, New Ulm, who do an awesome job in keeping our young men and ladies connected to Christ!) You are appreciated more than you know! (You'll be missed, Kris!)
- Thanks to Grace Biesterfeld, Ethan Hanevik, Ella Wurster, Josiah Guenther, Paul Kuske, Isaiah Heins, Rachel Schoeneck, Jacob Guenther, McKenna Dressel, Ella Hunter, Kathryn Dinse, and Caleb Pavelchik for being a part of the discussion. Your insights were awesome! I am privileged to serve you in whatever small way I still can! You have my email address and my phone number.
- Thanks to Ella Hunter and Gabbie Bleick for running our "Easter for Kids." I'm proud of you! You did an amazing job! You've got the job for as long as you want it! :) You also have my email address and my phone number.
- Thanks to my eighth grade catechism class for your valuable insights and for learning apologetics with me. As squirrely as you can be, you're a great bunch of kids and I look forward to seeing your faith grow and blossom in your high school years. Don't hesitate to text, email, call, or "snap" me when you need to.
- Thanks to all of the youth of our church for being active in ministry, singing in choirs, playing instruments, helping with VBS and soccer camps, and for generally being godly Christians who understand law and gospel, sin and grace, and for letting me joke with you… and for keeping me humble. :)
- Thanks to all of the St. Paul's, MVL, and MLC students for trusting me with your struggles and trusting me to share answers from God's Word. That's where they will always be found! You provided valuable insights to this paper. You are appreciated. You are cherished. Always remember your identity; that you are redeemed, forgiven, and dearly-loved children of God. Thank you!
- Thanks to all of the St. Paul's, MVL, and MLC faculty and staff for letting me play on your team!
- Thanks to my associate, Pastor Jeff Bovee, for letting me bounce ideas off of him. I appreciate our partnership and your wisdom whenever I need it.
- Thanks to my wife, Becky Guenther, for letting me do the same. She gives me her wisdom often, even when I'm not seeking it! :) Thank you, hon! (And thank you for making pizzas for the panel discussion.)
- Thank you to Thrivent for providing an Action Grant to host a focus group of youth to give me feedback.
- And most of all, thanks to God for keeping me connected to Christ through my preteen and teen years, through college and the seminary, and to this day. It's only by the grace of God that any of us are still connected to him!
- And thank you, God, for loving our children more than we do! Please keep them in the faith until their final victory! Help us to help you to that end! Amen!

Appendix #1

Dad Date

https://bit.ly/DadDate

Begin with Prayer.

Affirmation

- I'm proud of you for...

Worship Life

- How has your faith grown lately?
- Personal devotions – How are you doing? How could you improve?

Emotions

- What's got you worried or scared right now?
- What's got you excited right now?
- What's the hardest thing in your life right now?

Man-Up

- How are you growing physically?
- How are you growing mentally?
- How are you growing spiritually?

Relationships

- How are things with your friends?
- How are things with your classmates?
- How are things with your teachers?
- How are things with your brothers?
- How are things with your parents?
- What girl(s) do you like?

Workload

- How's your homework load?
- How are your chores going?
- How are your extracurriculars going?
- How is your job going?

Actions

- What one goal do you have for this next quarter?
- How can mom and I help you with that goal?

End in Prayer.

Appendix #3

Tuition Scholarship Program Proposal

The Proposal:

Offer a small tuition discount to any parent (or legal guardian) upon completion of the entire Bible Information Class. This discount would be offered to members and non-members alike provided they take (or retake) the BIC. The discount would expire after 3 years, but could be renewed by taking another Bible Class (I'm thinking "102" on the Small Catechism or "103" on the book of Romans.)

The Rationale:

The discount would be offered upon completion of the entire course for the following reasons:

1) We hang the carrot of discounts in front of parents to keep them coming to hear the Word, rather than drive them with the stick of a disenrollment threat. Thus, we make them responsible for taking the class and making up missed lessons (rather than me responsible to hunt them down and set a time to do "make up" work). We would avoid ever having to carry out our threat and release a student (and remove from them the opportunity to be instructed in God's Word) because parents refused to make the Word a priority. (Note: Careful attendance records would be kept to ensure that no lessons were missed.)
2) The discount would encourage parents to take the entire class and not just the first six lessons. This allows adequate time to build a relationship between pastor and parent and would take parents through the "whole counsel of God." Those interested in membership would be encouraged to take the course. Those not interested would better understand the differences that divide WELS Lutherans from the other denominations to which they belong.
3) Making the discount available for completion of the course, rather than basing it on membership, guards against anyone joining the church purely for monetary gain. They would only join if they were in full agreement with the doctrine taught and sought a church home. Ultimately, our goal is not to get more members in our church, but to get more members in the Church (that is, the Kingdom of God). Our goal is to expose parents to the Word of God and then step out of the way to let the Holy Spirit do his thing in his time and in his way. After all, we can expose people to the Word, but we can't force them to believe it. That's between them and God. If they want to become members upon completion of the course, that's great, of course. But there will be no external pressures to do so.
4) Making the discount available for completion of the course, rather than basing it on membership, has these added benefits as our own member parents take the BIC again:
    a) There are no perceived inequalities between the non-member parents and member parents, as if we gave preferential treatment to our members because they are a part of the club.
    b) Who couldn't use a review of the basics?! Even though I've taught the course dozens of times, I personally grow in my faith every time I teach it and get to know the Word even better. Our members will be blessed by God through the study of his Word.
    c) Members in the BIC build relationships with the non-members. They get to know each other. They get to care about each other. They talk to each other in church when the non-members come to visit. It becomes a big part of the outreach strategy as non-members build relationships with someone other than the called workers.
    d) The class would take over four months, prolonging the discount for at least that long. Thus, we could milk as much money out of the parents as we can for as long as possible. (Just kidding!)

e) Finally, if members hate the Word of God so much that they refuse to be inconvenienced to come to a Bible Class, fine. Let 'em pay more! (Just kidding again, by the way!)

Past Success:

We only implemented this the last year of my ministry in Raleigh, but as I left I had 19 in my BIC (which was the highest I'd ever had in one class in Raleigh). Just last week (10/11/10) I learned that 4 families joined the church through the preschool (after finishing the BIC that they began with me). That never happened in my 6 years there. I tried to get this plan in place the first year I was there, but many were concerned about the dollars lost. But I would argue that this was more direct to our mission of reaching souls with the Gospel and making disciples (students) of all nations. I am very happy that the program is now in place there and that it's making members for the Kingdom of God and for Gethsemane Lutheran Church.

The Cost:

Based on current figures, a 5% discount would cost Grace (in uncollected tuition) $114/yr. for the first year (at $3,800/yr. parents would pay $380/mo. for the first four months while taking the class. They would then pay $361/mo. (with a $19/mo. discount) for the last six months. $19x6=$114) and $190 ($19x10) for the next two years (or $494/student every three years or $1,482/student over nine years).

At worst/best case scenario (depending on how you look at it, whether from a financial or missional outlook), if every parent of every student completed the class every three years, it would cost $9,500/yr with 50 students. (But we would still make $180,500 – 95% of $3,800 x 50 in tuition.)

Finally, if this is too great of a cost to carry out the mission of the church, much or all of this could be recovered with a tuition increase. A 5% tuition increase for the 2012-13 school year would cover the cost of the tuition discount even if all parents completed the BIC in the summer of 2012, prior to the start of the school year. We would have exactly the same incoming tuition per student that we currently have.

The Blessings:

- The joy of (better) carrying out the Great Commission.
- Members and non-members alike better understanding our mission.
- Growth of faith in members and non-members alike.
- An increase in church membership?

Conclusion:

These are my thoughts. I'm eager to hear yours. Let me know what you think, what your hesitations are in my plan or my approach, or how we can make it better. As I understand it, the school was started here with the expressed purpose of being an outreach arm of the church. Let's continue to look for ways to better make that happen! Let's be as shrewd as snakes, innocent as doves and pray for God's blessings on our outreach efforts!

Your servant in Him,
Pastor Guenther

Appendix #3

Apologetics (according to “Meditations”)

Weekly Theme:
A Lamp Shining in a Dark Place

Bible Verse:
We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16,18 ESV)

Apologetics is the serious discipline of defending the Christian faith against its detractors. Confessional Lutherans haven't always put much stock in apologetics—after all, we are saved according to Scripture alone. And while it is true that confessional Lutherans wouldn't put apologetics on the same level as gospel proclamation when it comes to saving souls, apologetics can serve a good purpose in removing stumbling blocks and gaining an honest hearing for the truth of Scripture.

Apologetic arguments have to do with either reason and philosophical proofs for the existence of God or archaeology and corroborating works of ancient historians. Another powerful argument is what we find in Peter's words: eyewitness testimony.

Even in an age of forensic science and DNA testing, eyewitness testimony is perhaps the most powerful evidence in a court of law. Why? Because what we see and sense is real to us and has a real bearing on our lives. Witnesses on the courtroom stand are sworn to tell the truth of what they experienced because justice needs to be served for the good of society. The innocent must be defended and the guilty must be punished. Otherwise, everyone can suffer for the crime.

So why was Peter's eyewitness testimony so important? Why was it so important for more than five hundred people to see Jesus after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)? Because nothing is more real for us; nothing has a greater bearing on our earthly present and heavenly future than knowing who Jesus really is and what he's really done for us. Without the real-world eyewitness testimony that Jesus has blessed us with, we could not be confident of eternal life.

Yes, some people think the Bible is nothing more than cleverly devised myths. But the fact is that Jesus appeared in real history for human eyes to see and ears to hear and mouths to share. By his transfiguration and later his resurrection, Jesus proved that he really is the Son of God who came to save human souls for eternity. A real Savior for real life—what a gracious gift!

(NPH Meditations 2/17/2026)

Appendix #4

My Drug Problem

By James A. Schneck

When I was young, I had a "drug" problem.

It began at a very early age-in fact, at the time I was born. Born in sin was an understatement. I was a miserable infant, screaming to get what I wanted and keeping my parents up at night. But my parents did what was best for me-they drug me off to church to be baptized. Oh, I cried, even screamed, when that cold water hit my head, but it was for my good.

When I was a little older, my parents drug me off to church for worship. I told them that I would much rather be playing, but to no avail. They made me sit in the pew and held me tight when I tried to run. When I made a commotion, my father drug me off to the narthex to be disciplined. Then he drug me back inside the church and made me sit on his lap and listen to everyone sing hymns. Oh, I heard those hymns so many times! They burned themselves into my mind until I could sing them in the car, at the table, or in the grocery cart.

When I was old enough to be left alone, they drug me to Sunday school and left me with an old woman I didn't know. I ran out the door, and the pastor caught me and drug me back. I finally gave up and went with the program. Once I learned the ropes, it wasn't so bad. I knew every Bible story word for word because I had heard them so often. When I got home, Mom drug my memory work out and started practicing with me. That stuff so filled my mind that I can remember it to this day.

When I turned five, my parents drug me off to Christian day school. Boy, was that tough. Homework like you wouldn't believe and catechism instruction and Bible history to boot! I whined, I cried, but to no avail. I was so happy to graduate-I thought. But then my parents drug me off to Lutheran high school. All the regular stuff and religion on top. Every day I was drug off to chapel by my teacher, and no way could I come in late.

Then they discovered I could sing. Yes, it was low and loud, but it was on key! My parents drug me off to choir. And if my time wasn't full enough, Pastor drug me down to his office to talk about teaching Sunday school and vacation Bible school, and counseling at summer camp. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

Well, I finally grew up, too old to be "drug." Now I was on my own. But it was too late-I had developed a habit. I found that I enjoyed singing hymns. I remembered those Bible passages-and found opportunity to use them. I wanted to be a camp counselor and Bible study leader. And strangely enough, I wanted to become a Christian day school teacher! I couldn't help it. My faith had become such an imbedded part of my life that it felt the most natural course to take. I would feel a huge emptiness without it. I now view my "drug" problem as a great blessing and the most important gift that my God-fearing parents passed on to me.

Did you have a "drug" problem when you were young? If so, thank God for the training and nurturing given by your parents and church! Do you have children now? It's time you started them in building habits of worship and service to their Lord. They may not like it-they may resist-they may even resent you for it. But one day they will look back and thank God for the blessing of dedicated Christian parents.

Jim Schneck is the principal at St. John, Mukwonago, Wisconsin.
(*Forward in Christ*, September 2004, pg. 36)