

BUILDING TOGETHER

Note: The Rest Stops for this month are excerpted from the book *Building Together: Developing Your Blueprint for Congregational Youth Ministry* by Carol Duerksen. They will focus on your work as a youth leader as you relate to the teens in your life.

REST STOP #1: The Power Of Handholding And Finger Pointing

Some people don't get too worked up about the decisions their youth are facing. "I make it through the teen years, and they will too," is their general approach. "Just let the kids work it out for themselves. I turned out okay and so will they."

The biggest problem with this approach is the difference between their teen years and today. When they were growing up, families (in general) exerted more influence on the youth. Extended families were a part of their support group. The church presented some significant "right and wrong" statements.

The media was an influence, but not what it is today. The Internet didn't exist. Teens were as busy as many of them are today.

The other extreme approach to working with youth today is to "lay down the law." Try to protect them from the nastiness of society. Shelter them, make sure they are "on the straight and narrow," and make most decisions for them.

Neither approach is adequate. The most important goal is to provide a support system—people, places, and settings where youth come in contact with people who are finger-pointers toward God. These people should be peers as well as elders and children; the places and settings should be inside and outside the church family where they can explore and grow in their faith.

Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, in their book *The Godbearing Life* highlight their observation of a mother and her toddler daughter in a park. As the two-year-old navigated her way over the grassy terrain, the mother gently held her fingers, allowing the youngster a "controlled wandering." From time to time, the mother would point to a tree, bird, or flower. The little girl would stop, giggle, point, sound the word her mother said to her, and then move on her self-made path.

Our role with youth is similar—while youth meander through their identity-shaping years, we hold hands and point fingers. Here's a real-life example:

Marcus (not his real name) grew up in a committed Christian family. His grandparents were "pillars of the church." His father taught Sunday school occasionally; his mother belonged to an interdenominational Bible study. Marcus wasn't the most dedicated youth group member, he wasn't baptized as a teenager, and rumor had it that some of his lifestyle choices weren't what he would have been taught in Sunday school. Marcus liked to live on the edge.

One Christmas vacation when Marcus was home from the secular university he was attending, he struck up a friendship with a schoolmate, Julia. Julia was, in many ways, the opposite of Marcus. She was the "perfect Mennonite daughter." That night Marcus and Julia talked into the wee hours of the morning. She discovered a young man full of enthusiasm for life and a serious side she'd never known existed. He discovered a young woman with a solid faith, a beautiful smile, and an open heart.

Six months later they were engaged.

What happened? Finger pointing and handholding. Marcus' parents, grandparents, and

mentor prayed for him. His youth group leader made a point of spending time with him at the ski slope. His pastor connected with him when he came home from college. He struck up a deep friendship with a young woman committed to Christ. His life had intertwined with people who, each in his or her own way, shared the love of God. When the timing was right, he responded. No one could make the decision for him, but they certainly could point the way for when he chose to take the step. Without a doubt, Marcus was blessed with life-changing handholding, and it wasn't just between him and Julia.

REST STOP #2: Look At It This Way

Sometimes it feels like you can read a book on youth ministry and it all sounds so good and "do-able." Then you get involved with kids and the reality bites. What a pain!

Like the time when you spent several sessions talking to your youth class about sex, and the importance of making right choices. Late one night several months later you get a phone call from a sobbing youth group member who thinks she's pregnant.

Or this scenario: The boy you're mentoring has bent your ear about needing money for a car. You help him land a good job. After a month on the job, he gets fired for being late to work too many times.

Or maybe it's your daughter, who insists on buying expensive name-brand clothes, despite your feelings that it is a big waste of money. Now she's taken a job that keeps her away from youth group—just so she can afford the clothes she wants.

Yes, teenagers can be such a pain. You put all of that time and energy into them, and then they make decisions that contradict everything you believe and have tried to teach.

Consider yourself privileged. I do. When a young cool teen person talks to me—little middle-aged me—I want to pinch myself. This teen has chosen me to relate to? Me? The woman who doesn't know how to choose the right shoes to wear with a skirt? Me, who's getting wrinkles under her eyes and varicose veins on her legs? Me?

And you know what else? Not only am I privileged to be a teen's friend, I am privileged to be a part of her identity-shaping time of life. Even when I am frustrated with her decisions, I'm there. Bottom line is that I will be there. Holding her hand and pointing my finger.

I don't always do it so well. I can be such a pain to myself when my own actions contradict everything I believe and teach. Thank God for grace for us all.

REST STOP #3: Are These All The Sons You Have?

In the same way all seven of Jesse's sons were presented to Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Then Samuel asked, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse replied. "But he's out in the fields watching the sheep."

"Send for him at once," Samuel said.

(1 Samuel 16:10-11)

It's a wonderful, refreshing story. God's man Samuel is on a mission to the village of

Bethlehem—he's supposed to find the next king of Israel. A holy headhunter, if you will. He's been told by God to check out Jesse's sons, and Jesse is more than pleased to cooperate. He presents his eldest, Eliab. Samuel can believe his eyes, but his God-sense has him wondering. His eyes tell him, "It must be this first one—he's tall and handsome, confident, the firstborn son." But God's whispering in his ear, "Don't judge by his appearance. I look on the thoughts and intentions, so listen to me. Next!"

Seven times Jesse parades another son in front of Samuel, and seven times he says "Next!" Finally there are no more sons waiting in the wings. Samuel has a moment of panic. God sent him here, but God doesn't want any of these fine young men?

"Are these all the sons you have?" he asks, trying not to seem worried.

"Well, there's David—he's just a boy. He's out with the sheep."

"Bring that boy to me."

And the rest is history. What a story to tell our youth! As they search for their significance, as they seek their self-confidence, we can assure them that God recruits everyone into God's kingdom—even small grubby shepherd boys.

REST STOP #4: Be All That You Can Be

Have you ever gone shopping with a teenager? Have you ever talked to a teen about his dream car? Have you ever listened to a girl talk about the boy she'd give anything to have on a date?

Underneath the search for the clothes, car, and guy who are "just right" is the search for significance. And in that search is the desire to be more, have more, live more.

Our Western culture clamors to provide the end of this search.. The media bombard us with the notions that sex brings fulfillment, violence solves problems, and winning is everything. Advertisers demonstrate how the right shampoo will get you the guy, the right car will get you the girl, and the right clothes will make you desirable. Politicians promise "the world" to teens at the expense of the rest of the world, and schools push students to compete in order to be deemed "successful." And of course the military promises "Be all that you can be."

Look at these promises from the viewpoint of a teenager. Who wouldn't want sexual fulfillment? Who wouldn't want to win? Who wouldn't want the guy or girl of their dreams? Who wouldn't want to be successful? Who, in the search for self, wouldn't want to be all that he or she can be?

How can the church compete with the millions of dollars spent on such promises? How can we communicate our message with the glitz of the Internet? How can we sell what God has to offer?

We can't.

What we have to offer our youth is a God who loves them unconditionally, a community of faith who will stand by them, and a body of believers who will take interest in each one of them. We offer them significance as favored, beloved, blessed children of God. We offer them our patience. We offer them the opportunity to be all that they can be—loving expressions of God's love in the world.

It's the least—and the most—we can do.