

**Bradley United Methodist Church
Greenfield, Indiana 46140**

**Student & Young Adult Ministries @ Bradley Report
Spring 2007**

Clarinda E. Crawford, Associate Pastor

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What is the purpose of this report?

When I was going through Licensing School (something I needed to do in order to receive a church appointment prior to completing any seminary education) in July of 2000, I had a teacher tell me that the most important things for a pastor to do is, “Preach, Teach and Call (referring to parish visitations or phone calls).” Since learning this, I have taken this motto to heart because I agree these should be among the top priorities of a pastor. In my first year at Bradley, this has been no different.

For the last nine months, I have observed a young contingent in the congregation from children to teenagers to college students to those in their 20s/30s/40s to parents of these individuals. This young category is energetic, hungry for knowledge, desiring a deeper relationship with Christ and very much willing to be involved (from volunteering time and vehicles and culinary creations to monetary support) in whatever aspects needed to make a ministry to children, youth and young adults (this includes college students) successful. I have heard numerous comments there are not many “young” people at Bradley. I have not done the specific math to determine what the ratio is, but I do know this: there are over 25 family units (representing the under-45 crowd) with regular worship participation. Over 40 individuals between the ages of 18 and 40 have regular contact with Bradley (this includes those who are away at college). Therefore, what a start we have to a very successful, all-encompassing ministry to those in pre-school and through age 40 (more on the age thing to follow).

In addition, for the last nine months, I have tried to maintain those programs that were in place prior to my arrival; however, I feel God pulling me, and us, to another level. God has already led Bradley into a new young adult ministry and a new children’s ministry program is beginning. Whatever the future holds for Bradley Student & Young Adult Ministry, it first cannot be built around any one individual, but a group of individuals sharing a vision and working toward goals. We should pause and ask ourselves, regularly, “What is it that God desires of us in this ministry?” Moreover, we should refrain from any answer that deals with numbers and attendance. Our goal, so unlike what we hear and read about in pop theology, should not be about growing (in bodies) our groups, but to see the spiritual growth of those involved in the ministries we have to offer. We cannot offer a ministry that will be attractive to everybody. We should not offer a ministry that will “rival” that of another local church. We should be about who we are as Bradley United Methodist Church in Greenfield, Indiana

(representing six school corporations and over ten colleges), and work from that point and grow from it and allow ourselves to come together and develop an appropriate ministry to young people that reflects the expression of what Bradley represents.

I am not exactly sure I can give you a listing of the purposes of this report. In part because I do not know what will happen. I do not know what the responses will be and what direction future ministry will take. So, my sole purpose (yes, there are two listed, but they tie together) in creating this report and sharing it with you is:

- 1) Generate energy, excitement and new enthusiasm and, in turn,
- 2) Lead to the creation of a Student & Young Adult Ministries Team (consisting of representation from all age groups, including children) to discuss the information contained in this report and to create, direct and lead future ministry initiatives. *If there is a current youth council in place, I need to know this, but I am not aware of any such active organization.*

Some Goals & Visioning:

Just as I ended above, this report is about you. You, the parent. You, the student. You, the 20-something. You, the 30-something. You, the youth. You, the elementary student. Or, even you, the grandparent. However, I have learned throughout my eight ministry years that expecting energy or a group to begin, literally, from a blank slate is not practical. Therefore, I want to offer you some of what I envision. This is not exhaustive. This is not a list of DOs or DON'Ts. You can completely reject, ignore, accept or work from this report.

- Creation of a group by April 30, with e-mail communication beginning on May 1 and a face-to-face gathering prior to Memorial Day Weekend.
- At least partial plan development and ready for implementation with the start of the school year in August.
- An all-encompassing Student Ministries program that works to serve all those in school (pre-k through college) along with a separate arm for Young Adult ministry.
- Within the “Student & Young Adult Ministry”, we need to re-examine our language. Language is very important in our society and many times, it can be a barrier. Let us look at what it means to say “Student Ministry” versus “Youth Group.” As I have witnessed youth groups throughout my ministry, I have become more and more convinced that some of what “youth group” implies is part of the problem with growing and expanding such a ministry. What does it imply? It implies a type of clique-ishness. I like the phrase “student ministry” because it is much more purposeful, active, engaging and spiritual. It carries with it the idea of students mentoring for character, instructed for doctrine and deeper understanding of the faith and the Church, and equipped for competency so that they will engage in effective ministry. The leaders in Student Ministry are there to model, mentor, equip and instruct. This is clearly the ministry

model of Jesus himself. Consider the phrases for a moment, “Youth Group”..... “Student Ministries.” I realize the concept of “youth group” is deeply rooted in many churches (and older folks have memories grandeur of their “youth group” experience); however, we need to listen to today’s young people that are being served by these ministries. Perhaps, we could consider specific names for specific groups under the Student Ministry umbrella – giving each group a unique identity and purpose (I also envision snappy logos and t-shirts accompanying each group).

- Consideration and concentration within the following areas:
 - Mentoring Program – connecting ALL young people with an older adult (not related to them) in the congregation to engage in an ongoing relationship throughout their Christian journey as it pertains to their involvement at Bradley
 - Intergenerational-Peer Ministry Teams – connecting ALL young people into intergenerational teams for regular study/learning from one another (and, yes, a 29-year old can learn from a pre-schooler!) and fellowship. An older member of the team would be the convener (not the “leader”) and be responsible for keeping the team moving forward and connecting and communicating on a regular basis
 - Service/Mission – researching, introducing and coordinating regular service projects, summer mission trips and promoting the camping ministries of the South Indiana Conference
 - Program/Planning – researching, introducing and coordinating regular “fun” outings for the various groups
 - Education/Curriculum – educational offerings, classes, study guides, etc.
 - Fundraising – researching, introducing and coordinating all “fundraising” initiatives to support the Student & Young Adult Ministries program of Bradley United Methodist Church

Theological Understanding of Student & Young Adult Ministries

If spiritually mature adults confess that life is complex and confusing, what do the young people of today feel? Some experience it as bewildering. Some go from one party to the next without even stopping to reflect on their experiences. Some even say that it is meaningless. At any rate, we need a template to place over experience to give life meaning, especially for today's young people. Without this, a sense of futility results. It is the testimony of many that the Gospel gives them that template. The Bible provides a framework within which to see life. Good news, Christian teaching, is not to be accepted unthinkingly, but as it has developed in its broad, catholic approach it has the ability to provide a framework or template enabling us to interpret life's confusion.

Described above is the situation I see and understand Student & Young Adult Ministry operating. I take it a step farther in Methodist tradition to understand it in light of what Albert Outler coined the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Along with the scriptures, history, reason and experience must also be balanced and weighed into the conversation.

We learn from scripture that some groups of people are not more human or more valuable than others. The creation stories of the Bible, declare that all groups of humans are created out of the same dust of the ground and that men and women are composed of the same material. Neither is intrinsically superior to the other. Instead, men and women are created in the divine image as equal partners.

The Bible then recognizes that women and men both sin and that their faithfulness towards God results in a disruption of their own relationships. The good news, however, is that this is not the end of the story. God is actively at work in every moment of life seeking to bring about healing and reconciliation because God loves. The biblical story of God's attempts to heal the wounds caused by sin is not one of steady progress. It twists and turns, goes up and down, has starts and stops. Nevertheless, God will not rest until all humans have had an opportunity to be reconciled with their Creator and with each other. This reconciliation will establish mutually beneficial relationships.

A large component of my understanding of the human condition is a type of reinvention of the traditional understanding of the scriptures, especially passages that give direct insight into such condition. The construction of anything theological must revisit the texts and research them to a new understanding based on attitude, context, system, meaning and principles – instead of

reading our current, modern-day interpretation into the text. It is not just about reading the scripture, deciding for yourself what it means and then applying it in any haphazard way of your choosing. Exegetical work should be done prior to using any scripture.

Of course, the epitome to this whole thing is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the one who most clearly revealed what God is like and what we can become. For Jesus, after all, healing the wounds and broken bodies caused by sin between men and women was a very high priority. Unfortunately, this is not always the case for all of those people who were disciples of Jesus in subsequent generations. This, then, takes us to look at Christian History.

Throughout Christianity a simple but powerful truth has existed. On the one hand, there has been the impulse to heal, liberate and empower all God's people for their own sakes and for the sakes of those whom they can then serve more effectively. On the other hand, there is the contrary impulse to restrain and restrict some of God's people from developing their gifts and to produce theological justifications for doing so. Throughout history, there have been pockets of healing and it is not difficult to discern which of these impulses – healing or hurting – is more harmonious with the life and ministry of Jesus. For any history that intends to be relevant, which I purport Church History to be, will grapple with present concerns as they reinvent themselves from the past.

Reason is also a helpful tool for us as we struggle to understand better the human condition as it relates to our ministry with young people. Clearly, a reasonable response to any issue is needed if not for anything else than to allow solid dialogue around the issue at hand. Without reason, statements quickly become irrelevant and irrational considerations. I was raised in a very fundamentally believing community – for the most part – and it became quickly evident to me that the Christian mores I was being taught fought against the very nature of God's creation. It was reasoning and experience that brought me, at the age of 19, to see that the things I was being taught (or not taught) growing up from those around me regarding any part of the human condition were rooted in fear, bigotry and authoritarian mentalities rather than in God or love.

Experience is needed because it has to make sense to the individual. Every individual faced with a result of the human condition will have to draw upon personal experience, in some way – positive or negative, in order to relate it to the community, as they understand it. Life

does not consist of ideas that we push and probe, or arguments that we wield one against the other. Life is not drifting on a cloud of dreams, nor is it burying us in the mines called school, sports and work. Life is for living. It has to be experienced. Tasted. Lived. Experiences differ from one person to another so that no two people experience life in exactly the same way. However, many people share similar experiences. That enables them to talk to one another. It gives meaning to language. It creates what is called a horizon of discourse. The Gospel arose out of experience and it speaks to experience. Thus, it throws light on our human experience.

Following the lines of John Wesley, I do place primacy on the Bible and its scriptures; however, I am not sure how primary its purpose actually serves aside from lip service. I say this because no matter what translation of the Bible you read, your reading of it will be influenced by your understanding of history, your ability to reason, and your previous and present experiences. The Bible must be in dialogue with other sources of knowledge and insight.

In my basic Christian understanding of life and the human condition, I believe the Bible to be primary simply because that is where I start. Depending on the situation at hand, history, reason or experience may weigh more heavily in my final decision; however, my primary, starting focal point would be the Bible. The way I proceed to analyze and criticize the Bible, then, would be by use of the other sources. Thus proceeding to either strengthen my understanding of those scriptures or weaken them while I reach my conclusion.

As the Galilean angler threw out his net and drew fish in with it, so Jesus invites his followers to throw out their influence around them to draw people into God's realm, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." (Mark 1:17) More often than not, we seek to draw people to ourselves or to our church. It boosts our ego to do that. That is not the way Jesus calls us. His way is to draw people to God so that, by faith and obedience, they come under God's leadership. This task to which Jesus called those first disciples is the task to which he still invites us.

In recruiting fishermen to his mission, Jesus used fishing imagery, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:19) As the fisher draws fish with his or her net, so they are invited to draw people into God's realm – the realm that is both anticipated in the future but that is a present reality for those who have the eyes of faith to see it. Therefore, the disciples are to be involved in his mission. Followers of Jesus in every age are called to be in an extension of this mission. The Church's principal task is to draw people into God's realm of peace and

justice, truth and righteousness, intimacy and fellowship. Whether they become baptized Christians or not, the principal aim should be to help people live according to God's way. Disciples will see the importance of people placing their faith in Jesus both as Savior and as Lord, but they are called to encourage life under God's reign even where this faith is not professed.

Long before we turn to God in repentance, God is holding out God's arms to us in love (Baptism). "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) God who created us in love reaches out in love to redeem us. God, with whom all initiative lies, makes the approach to us before we ever think of going to God. It is that parental love that gives us security – that accepts us even when we feel unacceptable to ourselves, that draws us and enfold us so that we know that we are at home. This is the Gospel message. This is good news: God's dependable love is ready to accept us just as soon as we are ready to be changed from arrogant and defiant creatures and come to God in humble repentance. Out of this message the Church is able to say to repentant sinners, "Your sins are forgiven."

Children's Ministry & Application (Pre-K thru 4th grades)

I fully admit that Children's Ministry is a new realm for me. Therefore, it presents me with a growing edge. My first major experience with elementary children began with a "Kid's Klub" group in 2004. Last summer, prior to moving to Greenfield, I played my first major role in a Vacation Bible School program. Since the school year started last fall, I have been involved with a chapel program for Bradley's pre-schoolers and I can tell you, I have learned a lot and I have a lot to learn! These young minds ask the best questions and they learn literally and quickly: "How can we know God really exists?" "I don't have to listen to you; God is the only person I have to listen to." "Why, if God wants us to be good, is it easier to be bad?" "How come everything in church is always like kindergarten?"

Children's ministry is being the church with children. Children are capable of meaningful religious experience. Children sense God's presence and respond to it. Children have deep relationships with God. Children should be active participants in the ministry of the church.

Our role as adults is to nurture and support children; to create positive experiences of faith community by including children in our worship, education and administrative life; to help children *be*, with us, the Body of Christ.

Currently, Bradley offers a solid Sunday School program; as well as alternative worship services (*Wee Worship* and *Worship Your Way*) for those younger in years – during both the 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. worship services. In addition, there is a very active and dynamic Vacation Bible School Team at Bradley that, as I witnessed in my second week (or so) at Bradley last year, offers an excellent VBS experience.

I do want to challenge our current understanding of children in the church. For too long the church has taught, and taught well, that worship is for adults and education is for children. The problem with this is children are just as capable of worship and most adults need as much education as the children! Children, for a variety of reasons, have been lost by so many churches. Today, families seeking churches – you know, the "we're shopping for a church"-type – are looking for churches that have something to offer the entire family and not just on Sunday morning (which Bradley does well from what I know), but throughout the week.

Let us consider what it means to include children into our life as a congregation and our experience of Christ as a church. The pursuit of genuine inclusion leads to some particular

challenges. We must find ways to acknowledge and respond to the needs of people of all ages to learn more about their faith and to know that their presence at occasions for both worship and learning has meaning for the life of the community. We can ponder these things by asking:

- How do we include children into the life of our community?
- How do we listen to what the children and their parents have to say about what they need to receive from, and give to, the church?
- How do we prepare for the full and meaningful inclusion of children and young people in the range of events and activities of congregational life: events such as congregational planning, retreats, liturgical calendar observances, outreach into the community, discernment of ministry and administration?
- How do we face the challenges and anxieties that could surface in light of trying to be more accommodating to children within the church?

Being grown-up does not mean that we are all confident about sharing our faith with others or that we have figured out what living our baptism means. This statement is especially true for the generation that has left, by and large, the church (and, now, may be returning). If they do return (usually for the sake of their children), these people feel uncomfortable in a worship environment that is either new to them or has changed dramatically since their childhood experience. They do not feel confident in sharing the faith with their children. These parents return so someone more capable can answer the difficult questions their children are beginning to ask. We need to offer opportunities for all ages to learn more about what faith means to their lives. We need to acknowledge that most adults feel ill-equipped to “teach” their children about faith, the Bible, religious questions and values. This situation is especially true for parents entering the church for the sake of their children. We need to help parents, and other adults who volunteer to be with our children, to see that their role is to present God and religious issues in a loving and caring atmosphere – to begin a pilgrimage, best taken together, which leads into a wonderful adventure of learning about their relationship with God, with the Christian community, and with each other!

As we have watched and participated in this faith journey in our own lives and work, we recognize the mystery; we cannot know all there is to know about what we find along the way. Sometimes we can teach one another. “Was Jesus ever as bratty as my little sister?” “How can I know God can be everywhere, especially when sometimes I feel scared, like at night or in the school playground?”

More often we will question and explore together and, perhaps, surmise what might be the case. “If God forgives us, why did God kick Adam and Eve out of Eden?” “Is God a man or a woman?” “If God knows how I feel, why do I need to pray?”

Sometimes the process will be fun. “My dog died on Good Friday. Did my dog die for all dogs’ sins?” “Why can’t God give me everything I ask for?”

Sometimes it will be difficult. “Why did God make my brother die?” “If there is a God, why doesn’t Daddy believe in him?”

At other times we may just need to recognize and accept the mystery. It is difficult and exhilarating to be on this pilgrimage together. Moreover, if we give the children answers for everything while they are young and formable, they quickly learn there IS, indeed, an answer for everything and so when they are older and cannot find an answer, the confusion can be so great that they decide to leave the church. A healthy environment for faith to grow is a place at church and at home where people, whatever their age, can ask and begin to find answers together. While children will pose questions in ways that are charming, disarming and seemingly naïve, they are, for the most part, the same questions that adults wrestle with. Our spiritual pilgrimage, as children or as adults, differs less than might be thought. Sometimes the right answer start with: “I don’t know. Let’s find out together.” “I’m not sure, but let’s suppose...” “This experience in my life leads me to believe that...”

Children, like adults, are capable of bringing and receiving both experience and knowledge. In this way children are ministers within the church. Take the 8-year old girl, for instance, who came bursting out of the church one morning in Advent completely distressed. When asked what was the matter, the girl responded, “How could it be possible for Mary and Joseph to know that Jesus was going to be a boy when there was no amniocentesis?!!”

It is with all this, I call us into a conversation to evaluate our current programming for children and consider all the possibilities for a future Children’s Ministry program.

Youth Ministry & Application (5th thru 12th grades)

Many of the facts and illustrations that follow are from a 2003 Lilly Endowment-sponsored extensive survey called the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). You can find more about adolescent religion and the history of the NSYR at www.youthandreligion.org. Or through the publication, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (by Christian Smith, 2005). This was the NSYR's first major publication following their research and subsequent findings.

When it comes to dealing with the youth of today, one cannot possess a strict code of conduct. Youth do not function in a church setting with a list of DOs or DON'Ts. In earlier youth ministry settings, I did not immediately recognize this, but I since have (thank God). Since acknowledging this, I have looked for “teaching” moments within any given setting at any given time.

I knew from my previous teenage years (years that I can still recall) that the Bible did not have much to say to me, so it had to be made relevant. I had to see a clear connection between a Bible passage and my life at the time. Now teens do not even seem to want that connection, or at least, in that order. They want their life situation first and then application of the Bible to it. Therefore, within this framework, I attempt to *do* youth ministry.

When most teenagers think of God, they think of someone who looks like a grandpa and services them like “Divine Butler,” says Dr. Christian Smith, lead researcher for the NSYR. Many teens treat their Christian faith as “instrumental,” meaning that God exists to help us do what we want because God fundamentally wants us to be happy. Smith gives this mind-set a name – “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

It is an umbrella terms used to describe a parasite that is embedded itself in every major religion, not just Christianity. **If Moralistic** (life is all about making right and wrong choices; the goal is to be a good person who exhibits good morals) **Therapeutic** (God exists for our pleasure, not the other way around; faith in God is important because God helps us get what we want) **Deism** (although God exists, God is an essentially unknowable lawgiver; we cannot have a relationship with God because God's distant, although “on call” to fix problems) **is broken down to its core, it basically means our teenagers do not understand the basics of the gospel, the person of Jesus or the role God really wants to play in their lives.**

When the WWJD (what would Jesus do?) movement began, it received a lot of press and promotion from the “in” churches and the “in” youth leaders and so it quickly swept the nation. I, however, felt a deep unrest about its foundations because it never really answered a more primary question, “If Christians are supposed to be following Jesus, why aren’t they making more of an impact in their daily lives?”

You see, WWJD assumes we know Jesus well enough to make an educated decision as to what he would do in any given situation. And I do not think we do. The overwhelming evidence from the NSYR proves that we habitually forget the person we are supposed to be following. What is even worse than forgetting Jesus is forgetting the message that God gave us through Jesus. Even with all this said, though, we have to admit that since the beginning of humanity, we have been fantastic forgetters – remember Adam and Eve and their quick forgetfulness? And so the perpetual cycle began: we start out faithful to God, then slowly forget God, then turn away from God (sin), then experience God’s call again, then begin to remember God again, then return to faithfulness and it repeats over and over and over and over again – throughout our individual lives and throughout our history.

Not long ago, I had heard another person who deals a lot with youth tell of how her sixth-grade girls would talk about their relationships with God. They treat God as an “important accessory” in their lives. That is, it is important to wear the right clothes, listen to the right music, watch the right TV shows and worship the right God.

That is not the gospel of Jesus!!! Jesus disciplined his followers into relationships with God that were all-consuming – they were supposed to be the *hub* of their everyday lives, not the *hubcap*. You see, at some point, if we really want to teach teenagers to “do what Jesus did,” we have to ask ourselves how well they know the basics of faith. FOR EXAMPLE, a fast journey through Matthew’s Gospel reveals that:

- Jesus spent an astonishing amount of time praying – and much of that time appears to be spent in what we might call “spiritual warfare.” He knew his followers were going to be in some very nasty “fights” with a foe whose goal was to “steal and kill and destroy” the message of love that they were to be about.
- Jesus enjoyed spending time with desperate, avowed sinners because they were honest enough about themselves to know they needed God.
- Jesus said our goal in following him should be to deliver the gospel well enough to cause some people to insult, defame and persecute us.
- Jesus hated religious rule keeping and took every opportunity he could to break man-made rules for the purpose of highlighting God’s deeper truths.

- Jesus told his followers to plunge themselves into the darkness – the mainstream culture – because they were meant to be a light. He was not describing a warm 60-watt bulb; he expects us to be spotlights.
- Jesus talked matter-of-factly about a state or condition of “Hell.”
- Jesus hated it when people prayed or served or sacrificed to bolster their identity or inflate their ego – he advised his followers to express the truth of their love for God by doing great things in secret.
- Jesus was quick to forgive those who were repentant and quick to blast those who weren’t.
- Jesus said the richest people were those who gave the most relative to what they had. He advised his followers that if their ties to earthly possession were so strong that they overshadowed their allegiance to him, they’d be better off giving away all their stuff.
- Jesus told us to study what people do more than what people say.
- Jesus made sick, crippled and terminally ill people well.
- Jesus loved a good party, apparently throwing himself into celebrations with such abandon that some religious people thought he was a drunkard.
- Jesus told us we actually have to go out and “harvest” new believers by telling the good news of God’s grace – we can’t wait around for “fruit” to detach itself from the tree and hurl itself at us or into our church. (please carefully consider what this statement is saying)
- Jesus said our loyalty to him should outweigh our loyalty to our family, friends and workplace relationships.
- Jesus told us not to focus our energies on fighting sin in others (pulling weeds) but instead to encourage good growth in others (growing wheat).
- Jesus said the root of our unbelief is our astonishing ability to forget who God is and what God has done. That’s why he tells and retells God’s story in every conceivable form and then urges us to pursue that story every day.

According to the NSYR, this basic teaching has not reached our teenagers. So, now is the time to try something new. What we have tried so far to teach our teenagers the most important truths has not transformed them enough to seep into their everyday lives – at least that is what the researchers with the NSYR discovered over and over (obviously, this can be contextual and it depends on individuals; however.....what did you know of the above statements prior to reading them?).

A popular bumper sticker reads, “If Jesus is the answer, what is the question?” We are answering questions that teenagers have not raised. Their **REAL** questions are all about the pragmatic realities that disturb, confuse and dishearten them. For example...

- “Why did God let my best friend die?”
- “If I agree to have sex with my girlfriend, will that get me the unconditional love I crave?”
- “If I pray hard enough, will God help me play so well that our team will win?”

So, it is within this context that we need to seek ways to best minister, educate, engage, excite and send forth the youth at Bradley.

Young Adult Ministry & Application (Post-high school & beyond)

The most difficult job in young adult ministry is defining what a “young adult” is. There are some obvious answers – those just graduated from high school (whether they enter the work force or continue in their education), those in their 20s and 30s (whether single, married or beginning families) and what about the 40-year olds? In some congregations, 40 is young! Therefore, truly defining this group is an impossible task and it has to be left to the individuals. Does the young adult ministry, as opposed to other opportunities, feed you? Do you relate well to the other individuals in the group? If so, then welcome to the young adult ministry group!

While young adults can feel lost in some churches, I believe that God passionately loves them and has an unbelievable purpose in mind for them. Young adults are energetic, passionate, compassionate and VERY resourceful people. And when they give themselves completely to God’s service, watch out – something amazing will happen!!

If young adults are universally interested in anything, it is building relationships. Sure, they might want different levels of friendship, but you can almost guarantee that in today’s culture, young adults long for connections with others.

Think about the stage of life at which young adults find themselves. Whether they are attending college, just starting a career, or getting settled in life as a 20-something, chances are they have moved several times in the past few years. The more frequent the moves, the easier it is to give up hope of finding satisfying and authentic relationships.

The good news is that the church is built on relationships and community. And our relationship with Jesus is the most authentic relationship we will ever have. In John 15:13, 15 Jesus told his disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends...I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” The Bible says many times that we are all connected – and this could not be truer within the connectional system of The United Methodist Church. We are family. In fact, scripture says as Christians, we belong to one another. Think of what our young adult ministry would be like if people felt truly loved and cared for the moment they entered the door.

By focusing on building real relationships in insightful, meaningful and creative ways, our group can offer a remedy to young adults who are suffering from loneliness and isolation. Together with all young adults, we can help build deep and lasting ties within our ministry. We can help young adults discover a sense of belonging. We can create an environment in which young adults learn to bear one another's burdens and love one another with Christ's love.

Whatever Young Adult Ministries looks like at Bradley, let us be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit!!

Pastor's Role: Guide & Resident Theologian

From my earliest days of involvement in a church "youth group" (yep, I came right out of a United Methodist Church youth group) and up until now, I can speak to a very real problem I have encountered – although, I did not know it was a problem until I entered the ministry process. The problem is, since the beginning of "Youth Ministry," the predominant idea for "Youth Pastors" or "Youth Workers" has been that generally they do not have to be theologically astute – and I can see the results of that already coming back to haunt the church. I am hyper aware of adults (young and old) who have grown up in the Methodist Church, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and The United Methodist Church, who cannot tell you who John Wesley is; what our two sacraments are; what *The Book of Discipline* is; what General Conference is all about; or even how The United Methodist Church is structured (like, with a Bishop). In large part this is because of poor teaching at an early age – when minds are most absorbent to knowledge (even though they might reject it at a time). Confirmands and/or new members should not be entering into membership of The United Methodist Church without understanding who and what The UMC is and is about.

I can speak to this from personal experience. In a short synopsis, I was accepted into membership of The UMC without knowing anything about the church or having a clue of what The UMC was about or stood for – its history or tradition. It was not until I was 21-years old and a senior in college that I experienced Confirmation Class – with a bunch of 12-year olds who knew more than I did – and was able to learn, finally, all about The UMC that I had professed membership in for more than seven years!

With emerging questions about Christian origins, Jesus' death and resurrection, the Bible and "Did Jesus really look like the bobble head doll?" we are faced with the reality that theology

can not just exist within the halls of the academic institutions. In fact, it is a pastor's job to relate the theology and understanding of an academic institution to the congregation and those that walk its corridors on a weekly basis. Theological rooted-ness will allow us to authentically minister in our local context and help us set parameters that will help us stay focused on our call to make students better followers of Jesus the Christ.

With this in mind, we have to wrestle with how to develop a theological approach in and about Student & Young Adult Ministry. While the possibilities may differ, I think there are some points that can be consistently applied.

First of all, the word "theology." Contrary to what many folks think, it is not really the study of God (as one might expect with the -ology on to the end). How can we really study God?? So, in essence, theology is the study of people's experiences with God as revealed through our scriptures and illuminated by our history, reason and personal experience. Leonard Sweet, in his book *Summoned to Lead*, writes, "If you're listening, your inner voice will tell you the next step, not some authority. The inner voice is your guide and leader. Instead of depending on power relationships, depend on spirit relationships. After all, who's the best mentor in the world? The Holy Spirit, hands down." So, today's emerging leaders and pastors need to listen attentively to what is not said so that we do not miss the opportunity to vocalize what must be said. Theological pursuit as practiced through daily ministry finds its roots in the art of attentive listening.

With 'theology' defined in this manner, it is safe to say that our theology drives everything we do in our ministries. The goals and visions for our young people cannot be extracted from the next book craze; instead they should be prompted by the theological understanding of God's self-revelation as revealed in the questions and the lives of our students. The principle of customization is essential in Student and Young Adult Ministry.

I challenge us to wrestle with what God is doing in Bradley and in Greenfield. Fight the temptation to be tossed around by every fad that catches your attention. Theology is a lived discipline that is developed and surfaces out of our specific ministerial contexts. Let us not limit what God can do when we obey and are faithful with the resources available to us. This theological approach to our ministries also gives us an interesting dichotomy. Surprisingly, a "youth pastor" is not synonymous with *event planner* or *baby sitter*. Although fun and games are an important component of what student ministry is about (and I do this), I have a calling to

share God's love, as revealed by Jesus, for the transformation of the world and I am called to do this with all those God has put under my care and that includes everyone at Bradley UMC – not any one group more than another. And, if this idea (perhaps in different words for each of us) of sharing God's love, as revealed by Jesus, for the transformation of the world is not what we are about in our Student & Young Adult Ministries, then we might as well put new signs out front that read, "Welcome to the Parks & Recreation Department." Unfortunately this is what so often happens when we allow ourselves to slacken in the pursuit of loving God with all our hearts, souls and *minds*.

With passion and consistency, we must let theology be a lived discipline that teaches us to listen attentively and look for teaching moments. In the process, we will gain an increased ability to resist following the many fads that surface. We will remain faithful to our call to be passionate, love-filled transforming agents and our young people will be able to show forth the light of Christ as they mature in their walk and learn to embody the idea that "theology is an ongoing pilgrimage."

It is interesting that Paul wrote to a young pastor, Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers" (I Timothy 4:16). You see, I entered ministry with an empty head in large part (at least in terms of theological understanding) and empty heads will never quench empty hearts.

I see myself, as it pertains to Student & Young Adult Ministries as being a guide, a resource and teacher (including teaching the teachers). What this will look like, exactly, I do not know, but let us work together to see what this could look like. Will you join others in this vision and journey? I invite you into the birth of a new, dynamic ministry at Bradley where all of our gifts can work together to share God's love, as revealed by Jesus, for the transformation of the world!!