



How do you fascinate young people? Confirmation, participation and social engagement

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Workshop der LIVT-Erlebnistage 2019

Relationships

What keeps a teen coming back to church? Before we discovered the answer to this question, we identified a lot of things that don't keep teens coming back to church. It's not entertainment, food, or games. It's not small groups and great conversation. As much as we want it to be, it's not theology, teaching, or the Eucharist (at least not at first).

It's not any of these things, but even though they aren't the answer to the question, we put a lot of effort into those elements of ministry because all of them contribute to the one thing. This one thing doesn't happen by accident. We set up our ministry to foster the most important factor in keeping teens coming to church. At our high school program called Uprising, we try to put Timmy at ease with an [irresistible and comfortable environment](#). We have games and music to [create a common emotion](#) for all the Timmys in the room. We [craft a message](#) about the timeless truths of our faith to draw Timmy into a new understanding. And we go to [small group](#) where Timmy can process the message with peers and adult leaders. At each point, Timmy is sharing an experience with people.

Can you guess what we think the most important thing is for keeping a teen engaged at church?

It's relationships. Our top priority with Timmy, especially when he's in Confirmation, is to help Timmy connect with leaders, peers, parents, and most of all, Christ and the Church. Relationships are a great place to start building faith because Timmy believes in God in the abstract--he can't see, hear, smell, touch, or taste God (at least not to his satisfaction). But he *can* have a relationship with a trusted adult. And with other teens who know Jesus. And with his parents who want to pass down the faith. And together, these people can introduce Timmy to our Savior.

Small groups and messages aren't what keeps Timmy coming back, but they lead to relationships if done right. We want our small group leaders and ops ministers to play ping pong and serve pizza to Timmy and his friends. We want them to sit alongside Timmy for the message. We want our leaders and teens to put their cell phones away for small group. We want them to laugh, share, pray, and open up. Relationships spring up when these things happen.

There's also a strategy that underlies the way we talk to Timmy and try to appeal to him. This strategy changes from time to time as Timmy evolves. It can even be different year to year, but here are four things that we find appeal to young people right now:

1. **A movement FOR something.** Timmy doesn't want to be against sex before marriage, drugs, violence, and mistreatment of others. Timmy wants to be FOR something. He wants to be FOR something that gives his life meaning and gives him a sense of belonging. Before Timmy believes or behaves, he needs to belong. He may come into church with a bad attitude. He may dress in all black. He may have tattoos all over if he's old enough. We have to learn to be OK with that and welcome him warmly. He needs to belong. Timmy doesn't care what we know until he knows that we care. What else is attractive to Timmy?
2. **Moments, experiences.** He can be moved emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Moments like retreats give fuel to the fire. We take a group of 14 and 15-year-olds on retreat each October. As I said this morning, they got into spray paint at the camp and did this. **(Show photo)**. It was a stressful afternoon sorting it all out. The teens made some big mistakes-- perhaps 50 or 60 of them were involved. Many were repentant, but many were not. We were collectively disappointed in our teens. The day's events caused us to pause and rethink that evening's plan. Instead of the message we planned to give, we scrapped it. We wrote a new message addressing the incident but remembering that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We sent the teens to the same area they graffitied earlier in the day for the exercise we call Cross the Line. It's an examination of our actions and thoughts, and it gives them a chance to see that their peers are all struggling with the same things. Most teens came back with tears in their eyes. As the teens came back from Cross the Line, we reconfigured the chairs so they were in circles, and the small groups sat facing one another. We carefully explained how they were going to lay hands on each member of the small group, praying over them, and how we were going to do this before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. We brought the Eucharist into the room, and despite the concrete floor, teens knelt and despite their emotional walls, many of them wept. It's a massive, cathartic prayer experience, and more than anything else we do, it's a relationship builder. Teens talk about this retreat all year. Their small group from retreat holds a special place in their lives. Moments and experiences make a profound difference. Teens are attracted to them.
3. **Being around people who are like me.** The first question most people ask when entering a room is this: "Who is like me here? Do I belong?" Timmy needs to see people who are like him at the front doors, serving in different ways, sitting around him. That means people at his age and stage of life. Why would he want to come to a church that only has old people? Like attracts like. This is simple to realize but more challenging to implement. Entrust teens with responsibility. Empower them. They usually will surprise you and sometimes let you down, but it's always worth the risk. Teens need to see other teens serving around them.
4. **A relevant message.** This is where things get challenging. We have to speak to Timmy and his life situation with a relevant message. He is unconvinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. The truths we preach are eternal, but how we communicate them evolves. We work really hard on every message for teens. We spend about six or eight hours preparing a message each week. That process starts in the spring with an offsite meeting to plan the message series for the next year. Then we match Scripture and themes to the series. We research stories and anecdotes that fit what we are sharing. We write the message and rewrite and edit it. We

rehearse with people (or on video). We practice roughly 3-5 times, sometimes more but hopefully not less. We give the message, and after that, we evaluate what worked and what didn't. We call this ruthless (*schonungslose Bewertung*) evaluation. We watch ourselves on tape. We read blogs and books and listen to podcasts to help us become better communicators. It's hard work to be relevant, and we don't always get it right, but we want to do everything we can do to be as relevant as possible. And just a disclaimer (Richtigstellung) -- being relevant doesn't mean watering things down or giving a lighter Gospel. It means translating the eternal truths that offer fullness of life so our young people can understand them.

For all our effort, though, the truth is that two hours on weekday evening every seven days isn't enough to build the relationship we want to have with most Timmys. They need relationships that go beyond our program.

The other relationships that we facilitate in Confirmation are teen to parent and teen to sponsor. Parents need to feel like they are part of the process as well, though we try to be careful they aren't taking on the teen's responsibilities. Parents are there at the info night, throughout the year at particular Uprisings, and at home after our weekly program, so we give them resources called [Parent Cues](#) to cue their conversations with their daughters and sons. We also offer two or three workshops per year for parents on topics like teen technology, dating, and sexuality. To connect sponsors and teens, we host three Spark Nights. These are discussion based and center around the Holy Spirit. We borrow from Dynamic Catholic's [Decision Point](#) and engage the sponsor-teen partners in praying over one another and even washing one another's feet.

When Timmy reaches Confirmation, it's not a bad thing for him to be overwhelmed by the relational investment we made in him--he has small group leaders, staff, parents, and peers pouring into him. All of us have an opportunity to show Timmy what it looks like to go the second mile. "Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles" (Mt. 5:41). When we do, Timmy begins to notice it's not just us walking alongside him but also Christ, and with that relationship established, he's far more likely to come back to church beyond Confirmation.

Great small group leaders can make or break the experience for Timmy. I'd like to end with a story about one such leader. His name is Nick.

Poop story

Preaching the gospel in an unexpected way. Same gospel, different presentation. Opportunities only there if we're consistent and growing ourselves.