Youth Groups: The Way of Benedict

A four-part series by Jenifer Gamber to help young people grow in community, faithfulness and relationship with God, featuring:

- The Rule: an introduction to the Benedictine Vows
- Obedience: Active listening and responding
- Stability: Faithfulness and fidelity
- Conversion: Reaching out and letting go

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By Jennifer Gamber

“The world into which St. Benedict was born was a troubled, torn apart, uncertain world. It knew little of safety or of security, and the church was almost as troubled as the secular powers. It was a world without landmarks.” So begins Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict by Ester de Waal. She might have been describing the world today!

Ester de Waal describes The Rule of St. Benedict as an ark with “the capacity to bring many safe to land.” Indeed, teens need a way to navigate this time of rapid change in the world today and their own tremendous physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual growth. The Rule promises to be an ark, a safe place for a community to gather and grow in tumultuous times.

The three Benedictine vows—obedience, stability and conversion—are particularly suited to the lives of teens by meeting their deepest desires, which Kenda Creasy Dean identifies in Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church as the particular yearnings of youth: a desire for communion, fidelity and transcendence.

Communion grows out of the need for a place to belong. The rule meets this yearning with the vow of obedience that calls for a commitment to listening to God and one another in community. God continually calls us to a relationship of listening.

Fidelity speaks to the reality that youth are seeking someone or something that will be there for them always. The rule meets this yearning with the vow of stability. God is with us always and in all ways. The vow of stability challenges us to seek God where we are.

Through transcendence youth seek experiences that move them. The vow of conversion meets this need by inviting us to be open to God’s call each day to grow in Christ, seeking love in all things.

God has sown these desires deep within teens, for these are also God’s desires. God desires their love. God, three-in-one, is community and calls them to love one another. God is “the Other” who gives their lives meaning in relationships. The Church is called to offer God’s steadfast love, God’s community and God’s meaning. The Rule shows how.

Using these vows as our guide, we can help teens build an ark within which to grow in community, faithfulness, and relationship with God. The first installment of this four-part series introduces the Benedictine vows. The next three issues will explore each vow more carefully and provide practices for a youth group to live into the vows and deepen the joy of fulfilling their passion for fidelity, communion and transcendence.

The Benedictine Vows

- The vow of obedience. Listen! This word begins the prologue to The Rule. Listen to God, listen to yourself, and listen to your neighbor. If we hear, like Abraham, Samuel, Esther, Simon and Andrew, we will act. The word “obedience” derives from the Latin obidere meaning “to listen.” This is not a passive listening. For a youth group, this vow suggests not only listening, but also choosing how to respond. It suggests ministry.

- The vow of stability. The Bible is replete with stories of God’s steadfast love. Time and again God’s people turn their back on God, but God’s love does not fail. What promise this holds for teens who are stretching their independence as well as their intellectual decision-making abilities! God’s faithfulness challenges youth to face themselves, stand with others and continue to listen through mistakes and difficult times. The vow of stability grows a community that can show God’s fidelity to one another.

- The vow of conversion. We are, with God, in a never-ending process of becoming. The vow of conversion affirms this reality that is sometimes painfully known by teens as they navigate a of new situations, abilities, emotions and demands. The vow of conversion suggests a practice of both reaching out and letting go. This vow is balanced by the promise of stability. It is embracing God’s call as the people God has made us to be within the community. The vow of conversion leads us into an experience of the “Other,” to a place outside ourselves, a place of transcendence

Effective youth ministry will look different for every congregation. Considering the Benedictine vows provides a framework for being in community in a way that meets the desires of youth for fidelity, communion and transcendence.
Tips for Planning a Youth Gathering

A youth gathering that honors the promises of obedience, stability and conversion will allow time for individuals to listen to God and one another, act on what they have heard, invite members to make a commitment, and provide opportunities for teens to experience God. Here is a model for meeting that follows this pattern:

**Welcome and Check-In**
How youth are welcomed sets the atmosphere. A welcoming activity provides a way for a new person to enter the group. Begin by creating name-tags that reflect each person’s identity with names, symbols and colors.

Check-in for a younger group may be informal conversation. Older teens tend to be less self-conscious and often welcome time to share what is going on in their lives. Check-in lets teens know that what happens in their lives matters and lets them listen to one another. Be prepared for check-in to change your plans all together.

**Community-Building**
Community-building activities build a sense of belonging, a key element in nurturing a teen’s desire to continue coming. Consider an activity that leads into the theme for your gathering.

**Activity**
A key practice of effective youth ministry is inviting teens to own and lead the group. While they might not have the time to plan each week’s activities, invite them to set goals for the year. Use these goals to determine broad themes.

Every moment is an opportunity for self-discovery, new insights and hearing God’s call. The activities you choose, however, can be sown with particular opportunities for conversion—of experiencing God, saying “yes” again and again to the Holy, and broadening horizons. Ask yourself these questions:
- How do the activities respond to the real lives, needs and interests of youth?
- Are there opportunities for sharing, witness and leadership?
- What do the activities teach us about being children of God?
- Do the activities appeal to a variety of learning styles?

Teens today have many demands on their time and may not be able to make a yearlong commitment to weekly youth activities. Give teens the opportunity to make commitments they can keep by planning activities in 4 to 6-week thematic segments.

**Prayer**
Ending in prayer allows the group to celebrate their time together, share insights and re-commit themselves to Christ and to one another. Invite a teenager to choose a prayer from a book or lead from the heart.

**Resources**

**Foundational Reading**

**Building Community**

**Activity Resources**
*Total Youth Ministry*, 6 volumes, (St. Mary’s Press, 2004).

**Prayer**

—Jenifer Gamber
Youth Groups: The Way of Benedict

The Rule

Obedience

Stability

Conversion

By Jenifer Gamber

Men and women who commit themselves to the Rule of Benedict make three vows: obedience, stability, and conversion. These vows guide them in honoring one another in community and drawing individuals and the community closer to Christ.

The vows in the Rule can inform the ways a youth group gathers and how they spend their time together. In this article the vow of obedience is explored.

Obedience, at first glance, seems to be at odds with the way Americans value self-determination. The word conjures images of authority, control, and following blindly. Dogs are obedient to their owners; soldiers to their superiors. Synonyms for obedience include authority, conformity, depersonalization, dominance, and subordination.

The Latin root of obedience is obedient, meaning “to listen” or “to hear.” The vow of obedience in the Rule of St. Benedict builds on that definition. It begins with the word “listen,” a word of invitation. Benedict used the Latin word obsculata, which means “incline the ear of your heart.”

Benedict counsels us to have the heart that Solomon desired (I Kings 3). When God asked Solomon what he needed, he answered “a listening heart.” Solomon, who is known for his ability to discern good from evil, wanted to know God’s words intimately. A listening heart has compassion and humility. It demands the whole self.

To whom or what shall we listen? Teens are the targets of many voices claiming authority; peers, culture, and media are the loudest. While in school teenagers spend an average of 21 hours a week watching television or playing on a computer and 15 hours with friends or shopping. 1 In contrast, the average teenager spends 3.5 hours a week alone, without peers or parents. 2 One-third of all teens eat meals with their families three or fewer days a week. 3

Benedict was very specific about where to direct listening hearts: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.” He invites us to incline our hearts to a loving God, to welcome the voice of the One who made us in God’s image. This is the message that can change church youth groups.

How can a youth group embrace the value of obedience? Grounded in obedience, youth leaders cease to simply deliver a product—activities that keep youth busy or moral lessons that replace God’s authority with their own—to people who offer themselves as an icon pointing toward God. To be that icon, they must be grounded in spiritual disciplines of listening and knowing that they are beloved children of God.

How can a youth group cultivate a spirit of listening to the presence of God? It doesn’t mean giving up fun, high-energy events. It does, however, mean changing how events are framed: taking time for prayer, sharing, and noticing God’s work within the life of the group. In Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry, Mark Yaconelli identifies seven practices that honor

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young people’s desire to hear the voice of God:
1. Sabbath
2. Prayer
3. Covenant community
4. Accompaniment
5. Discernment
6. Hospitality
7. Authentic action

A practice of Sabbath finds balance in work, rest and play. So often adolescents’ time is crammed with doing. Time for rest allows individuals and the group to stop and listen quietly. Time for play is not only refreshing, but also healing.

Prayer practices such as lectio divina, centering Prayer, and walking a labyrinth gives young people time to talk with God so that they might know God and be known.

Gathering youth as a covenant community invites them to support and affirm one another in what is certainly a counter-cultural endeavor. This comes out of their creations of their own covenant.

A principle of accompaniment invites youth to be friends, listening partners, and guides to one another. Practices include having prayer partners, sharing struggles without the need to give advice, and celebrating joys together.

The principle of discernment means listening actively for God’s call to ministry. It occurs as the group compliments one another on a job well done and names the gifts and talents of each person.

A youth group that values obedience practices hospitality by welcoming the voices of all people and offering hospitality through active service in the whole church. New members of the group are encouraged and welcomed.

The final principle, authentic action, is essential to the word obedience. If the group has truly listened, it will act on what was heard. Benedict says: “Welcome it [what you have heard] and faithfully put it into practice.” Authentic action reflects the gospel imperatives to feed the hungry, heal the sick, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, proclaim the good news, love your neighbor, and make disciples. Youth yearn to participate with God in building the kingdom of God.

The vow of obedience means listening to God’s desires and acting on what we have heard. While not an act of self-determination, obedience is the determination of self that recognizes ultimately who and whose we are.

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**Resources to Support a Life of Obedience**

*Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli (Youth Specialties, 2007). Experiences of four churches that switched from activity-centered to presence-centered youth ministry.


**Prayer**


**Accompaniment**


*The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating a Spiritual Practice*, Kay Lindahl (Sky-light Paths Publishing, 2002). Forty ways to listen to oneself, to one another, and to God.

**Discernment**


**Authentic Action**

Youth Groups:
The Way of Benedict

By Jenifer Gamber

Every community that meets regularly develops a rhythm. Unspoken rules draw the community together to lift up the gifts of each person and help the group grow fully. Other rules can tear down community, devaluing individuals and building unintended barriers for new members.

The Rule of St. Benedict offers a long-tested framework for developing healthy, Christ-centered ways to be in community. This essay, part of a four-part series, looks at the vow of stability. What grounds your group? What roots are deepened? What is the identity of your group?

In today’s dynamic, fast-paced world with a dizzying array of options, the value of stability seems like an anachronism. Advertising asks where you want to go, to think different and invites you to shop the world. Daily we are confronted by a multiplicity of media, faiths, people, histories and ideas. There is no doubt that we live in a global, pluralistic world.

A growing response to this meteoric rise in information and choice is a loss of identity—both personal and community. We see it in our faith community as well. Confronted with so many ideas from different traditions, what would one expect?

Unless rooted in their own tradition, teens will lack a solid enough sense of self to explore other traditions. Christian Smith in Soul Searching: A Movie about Teenagers and God (Revelation Studios, 2007) characterizes teens as “being out to sea” in their ability to articulate their faith.

In other words, they have few tools to establish identity and stability in their faith lives. Smith fears that we are heading toward a time when we will no longer have “distinctively Catholic and Jewish and Muslim and Wesleyan... You just have this sort of bland mush of be nice, call on God when you need Him.”

So what does stability mean? It is accepting where you have been planted, the community in which you will grow, and ultimately who you are. For a youth group stability means being faithful to God and knowing that you are made in God’s image and belong to God. This belonging is defined by the knowledge that God will remain steadfast.

Setting down roots that are grounded in our particular Episcopal faith will allow growth in times of plenty and the endurance to withstand times of need. Having committed yourself to God and one another, you and your group can stand tall and be who God has called you to be.

How can we foster stability?

• Take the time to ask one another, “Where is God in this?” Ask this question over a meal, while rock climbing, playing a board game, and doing mission work.

• Ask youth to make a commitment to showing up regularly. But don’t ask for a commitment youth can’t fulfill. One youth group asks its members for 4 to 6-week commitments while the group addresses a single topic or mission project.

• Provide programming that helps teens work together in teams and meet challenges in healthy ways. Ropes courses, hiking, rock climbing, and planning events from beginning to end provide opportunities to work together. Make time at the end of each activity to talk about what worked and how the group might work together the next time.

• Ask members to pray for one another each day between meetings. This could be done individually or shared in a text message or on Facebook. Carrying each other in one’s heart helps to knit groups together in deep and unconscious ways. Commitment takes courage and endurance. But like a building constructed for flexibility and reinforced for strength, a community built on a vow of stability can withstand an earthquake. Stability for an Episcopal youth group also means being rooted
in the Episcopal traditions of worship, Bible reading, service, and works of justice.

By saying “yes” to the Baptismal promises (see the Book of Common Prayer, p. 304-305) every day over and over again, we fulfill our part of God’s covenant with us. Post the Baptismal promises on the walls of the youth room to provide a constant reminder of who they are.

A simple and well-rooted way to anchor a group in the life of Christ and tradition of the church is to follow the liturgical calendar. The calendar takes us through Jesus’ journey beginning with Advent and the birth of Jesus, through his ministry, death and resurrection, and into the birth of the church. The calendar marks not only Christian time, but also times in our lives.

When we engage in prayers, liturgies and feasts of the church year, God is building a place of deep knowing in our souls. When we face times of waiting, our souls can return to Advent, and help us know the prayers and practices that will sustain us. Epiphany keeps us tuned-in to noticing Christ among us. When we need to examine our lives, we can draw on experiences of Lent. With Easter, we know that death never has the final word, whether it be the death of a loved one, a relationship or a dream. Pentecost tells us that God will give us the words to spread the gospel.

Post a liturgical calendar on the wall or paint one together. Circle dates that you would like to observe in a particular way. Dress your worship table with cloths that signify the color of the season.

In her convocation address at Virginia Theological Seminary, Lisa Kimball tells us, “Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and practice. Too much of the Episcopal Church has not been doing its practice. It has lost the knack of religion.”

By practicing our faith, teens grow to know God, themselves and their faith community. By offering a community of belonging, teens grow to know what it means to be committed to one another, in good times and bad. Being rooted, they will be well equipped to face the multiplicity of choices and information, to share their faith and to learn from others.

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**Resources to Support a Life of Stability**


*Freedom is a Dream*, Sheryl A. Kojawa-Holbrook (Church Publishing, 2002). A collection of essays by well-known Episcopal women such as Margaret Mead, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Looking at more modern Episcopalians helps youth see the community of saints to which they belong and their good works. Groups might read one essay to discern where God might be calling them.

*Jesus Was an Episcopalian (and you can be one too!)*, Chris Yaw (LeaderResources, 2008). While promoted as a newcomer guide, this book will spark conversation for life-long Episcopalians as well.

*The Message/REMIX Solo: An Uncommon Devotional*, Eugene Peterson et al. (NavPress, 2007). A paraphrase of the Bible written in contemporary language that opens the text in new ways. It is best read with the NRSV at hand for comparison. The Solo edition offers daily readings to be read in the style of *lectio divina*.

*My Faith, My Life: A Teen’s Guide to the Episcopal Church*, Jenifer Gamber (Morehouse, 2006). Information about the Episcopal Church, its unique tradition and way of being in community. Can be read alone, for confirmation or Sunday mornings in class.

www.myfaithmylife.org Resources rooted in the Episcopal tradition, including a liturgical calendar.


*Rings, Kings, and Butterflies: Lessons on Christian Symbols for Children with CD-ROM*, Harriet VanderMeer (Augsburg Fortress, 2006). A journey through the liturgical year through symbols, the Bible and prayer. For children of all ages, including adults.
By Jenifer Gamber

St. Benedict wrote the rule 1,500 years ago as a household guide. The rule, framed by the three Benedictine vows of obedience, stability and conversion, is as helpful today as when it was first written. It offers youth a safe way to navigate the quickly changing world of today, and grow along the way. Ester de Waal, in Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict, compares the rule to an ark that has “the capacity to bring many safe to land.”

What is Conversion?

Mention the word conversion to a group of Episcopal youth and they might look at you as if you were an alien. Images from the movie Jesus Camp might flash in their minds: children giving their life to Jesus, Pentecostals talking in tongues, others crying as they repent their sins and have their hands washed. Conversion is for religious fanatics, not Episcopalians!

Ask youth who in the Bible experienced conversion and they’re likely to name Paul and the dramatic episode of his being blinded when confronted by a great light. Perhaps they will mention instances of baptism in the Book of Acts: Pentecost, the Egyptian eunuch, or Lydia’s baptism in Philippi. All are significant conversions of people renouncing an old life to embrace a set of new religious beliefs. This is the common understanding of conversion: a radical change in one’s beliefs, world-view, and behavior—an uncommon event.

Benedict had a different kind of conversion in mind: a daily change of orientation to turn toward God. Using Esther de Waal’s metaphor of an ark, conversion is responding to the daily winds and currents that might take the ark astray by resetting the course toward God. The vow of conversion is a daily decision to be open to every moment of divine grace, an attitude of “yes” to God.

Conversion as a Daily Event

What does daily conversion look like? Let’s continue to use the metaphor of an ark. Before embarking on the journey, the captain secures a navigational chart, a compass, an itinerary and provisions. Upon departure the captain leaves port and turns toward the horizon, leaving all else behind.

We could compare this with a significant conversion in our own lives: baptism. In ancient times, a candidate for baptism faced west and renounced evil three times and then faced east and committed to Christ three times. Like the captain, candidates leave the old self and turn toward the horizon of Christ.

Along the journey are little conversions. Adjustments get made each day, and sometimes each hour, to stay on the path toward and with Christ. These daily adjustments are what Benedict means by conversion of life. Confession and repentance lead to a turning toward Christ similar to turning toward Christ in baptism. The Greek word for repent, metanoia, literally means to turn around. Conversion is making choices to follow God, constantly letting go of false idols of power, riches, glory and many other things that keep us from a life in Christ.

What is needed for this journey? A navigational chart, a compass, an itinerary and provisions.

A Navigational Chart

The navigational chart for Episcopalians is the Baptismal Covenant (The Book of Common Prayer, pages 304-5). The first part proclaims what God has done for us. John writes that God has given us “the way, the truth, the life” (John 14:6). The second part says what we will do for God. The five baptismal promises provide a map to a faithful response to God’s love.

As a youth group, explore the Baptismal Covenant as a framework for your practices in the Benedictine Youth Groups: The Way of Benedict

The Rule Obedience Stability Conversion
rule. What actions could the group take to live into the five promises? Consider holding a service of forgiveness from The Book of Uncommon Prayers or working with Habitat for Humanity to build a house. To remember the map, the youth might make and hang one or more large posters about the baptismal promises.

A Compass
A compass points toward true north. The Bible, the lives of saints, hymns, Christian history, liturgy, and theological reflection also provide direction. The Bible gives us stories of the human experience; liturgy feeds us; in reflection we see God’s work in our life. Remember, God breaks into the world from within us.

An Itinerary
When we plan a trip, we get out a map, locate where we are and where we want to go, and figure out how to get there. Will we walk, fly, or drive a car? Will we take a direct route or a scenic road? Like a trip, we must discern where we want to go in life. Discernment is the practice of identifying and developing our itinerary, where we are headed in life. We have to figure out where are we called to go and how to get there.

Set aside time each year as a group to take stock of who you are and where you want to go. Write a spiritual biography of the group, using photographs, prose, or poetry. List significant events, experiences and people that have marked the life of the group and reflect on how their beliefs have been shaped.

Practicing Discernment with Youth and My Faith, My Life (see resources) both offer discernment exercises for youth groups.

Provisions
We need nourishment for our souls, protection for our bodies, and energy for a trip. What will help us reach our destination? Friends, family, a job, a diploma, daily prayer, holding onto memories can nourish us. Deciding what not to take may be as important as figuring out what we need. We may need to let go of habits, grudges and other things to lighten our load, so we can easily change course if necessary.

Youth groups can practice both adding to or deleting our provisions by saying Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer. Evening Prayer reminds us that we experience a little death every night to reorient ourselves toward God. In Morning Prayer we greet the day with praise to God and pray for sustenance. Another way to balance our provisions is to mark both beginnings and endings. Celebrate birthdays, graduations, and passing a driver’s test. At the same time, take time to mourn loss of family and friends, the breaking up of romantic relationships, and moving away.

A monk was once asked, “What do you do there in the monastery?” He replied: “We fall and get up, fall and get up, fall and get up again.” [Tito Colliander, Way of the Ascetics. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1960, 54.]

Conversion is a daily practice. A youth group can provide the tools and practice of returning to Christ again and again even though they may fall.