

MISSIONAL IDENTITY AND YOUTH

Claire Smith

Director of *youTheology* and Youth Ministry Specialist-in-Residence

My research and scholarship seek to empower youth to move from passive observers to agents and partners in God's mission by making use of current findings about the adolescent brain, technology as a communicative tool, along with traditional means of learning and teaching. Another way of saying this is that it is aimed at empowering youth to assume a missional identity in which they recognize themselves as called and sent by God to witness to God's love as shown in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹ This would enable youth to live a life turned outward in service to God and the world as against a life turned inward. This is of great importance in a society that focuses so much on self-gratification. It is even more important for youth as they seek purpose and meaning in life and form identity that they find these in relationship with God and in living out God's mission.

Empowering youth to cultivate a missional identity seeks to avoid a compartmentalized approach to life in which mission fits one of many slots. It seeks to engender a life lived in love for God and neighbor that impacts individuals and society positively. This is how Jesus's life was. To have a missional identity, they must follow Jesus Christ as faithful disciples so that they may learn of Jesus Christ.

How do the recent ongoing research and findings on the adolescent brain help us in our work with youth to cultivate a missional identity? How can we interface with the new technologies that our teenagers use as a matter of course to work with the teens to this end? What type of discussions and activities would help our youth develop this identity? These are some of the questions the research seeks to answer.

¹Claire Smith, "Mission: Avoiding Fragmentation, Living in Love," in *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Ministry With Searching Youth*, ed. Sondra Mattahei (Xlibris, 2008), 127-144.

The relationship between this research and the Saint Paul mission statement is twofold. **It is aimed at leaders and educating them to empower youth to be disciples who are committed to God's work. In this way, the church would be renewed and the world transformed.**

My work with *youTheology* relates even more directly to the Saint Paul mission statement. In *youTheology*, **we educate high school leaders who will go out and transform the world.** This is our mission: to develop faithful leaders for the church and the world, now and in the future. Over the course of one year, youth explore the theme, "Loving God, Loving Neighbor," and the Methodist heritage in multiple ways. Pan-Methodist youth lead worship, engage in hands-on ministry, practice spiritual disciplines, listen to lectures by Faculty and members of the wider community, reflect theologically, discuss pertinent issues, visit historic American Methodist sites, and learn how to connect faith and public witness. This happens in rural and urban contexts. They are supported by *youTheology* staff, leaders, and mentors. In this way, we not only live out the mission of Saint Paul but are supporting the goals of the **"Covenant for Collaborative Action"** of the UMC as we "develop young leaders," "engage young people in the church to help transform the church," and help them to develop practices for life. It is our prayer that they will continue as **faithful disciples** and that what they have learned on their life-transforming year will help to **renew the church.**

The research and ministry with *youTheology* are important to me because I firmly believe that God calls youth to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, witnessing to God's love, that is to participate in God's mission. The gifts that youth bring to God's mission are essential for the uplift and renewal of the body of Christ as we follow Christ. The church is poorer without these gifts. God has called me to be one of the adults who will work with youth and equip other adults to do the same, namely to empower youth to live out their call.

Claire A Smith