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## Young people looking for and not finding 'authoritative communities'

"The clock is ticking." That's what a woman who works closely with young people told me recently.

The evidence indicates she is right. As discussed in my last column, our youth are declining in virtually every important category. If current trends continue, our society will explode and fall apart in a more visible, dramatic fashion, led by the disintegration of our young people.

As a society, we aren't doing much about it. Parents know there are problems but tend to think it's other people's kids who are struggling. Community leaders act as if better education will solve the problem. The Catholic Church, with its considerable resources, hasn't taken serious steps to address the problem.

So what should we do? Well, I'm going to summarize a proposal made by a group of 33 doctors, research scientists and mental health and youth service professionals in a report entitled "Hardwired To Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities." The report, published in 2003, was sponsored by the YMCA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values.

The report concludes that the cause of the crisis in American childhood is a lack of connectedness, meaning a lack of close connections to other people and a lack of deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.

The group of experts who compiled the report determined that, based on new scientific discoveries, it can be proven



from studies of biology and brain development that young people are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent, to God. In other words, close human connections and an authentic spiritual life result in positive biological and neurological changes in youth.

Here are just a few of the findings from the report based on recent studies. Assigning meaning to gender in childhood and adolescence deeply influences well-being. Gender greatly affects a child's sense of identity and social meaning. Boys and girls are different. These differences should not be glossed over.

Youth have an in-built desire for ideals that take them out of themselves and focus on the needs of others. This desire can be nurtured by good mentors and role models.

Religiosity and spirituality have a significant influence on well-being. In particular, studies indicate that personal devotions have a strengthening, protective impact on adolescents. Religious communities offer much of what young people need, as we'll see later.

The human brain is designed to ask ultimate questions and seek ultimate answers. Young people have a natural desire to know their purpose and meaning in life. These issues are not just religious, but they flow from our identity as human persons. We are hardwired to know the truth about our humanity.

Based upon these and other findings, the experts who prepared the report on youth concluded that what young people need is "authoritative communities." These are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and

who model what it means to be a good person and to live a good life.

An authoritative community has the following characteristics: it is a social institution that includes children and youth; it treats children as ends in themselves, rather than be valued for what they achieve; it is warm and nurturing; it establishes clear limits and expectations; the core of the work is done by non-specialists (family members, volunteers, and citizen-leaders); it is multi-generational.

In addition, authoritative communities have a long-term focus, reflect and transmit a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person, encourage spiritual and religious development and are oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the love of neighbor.

These qualities may seem like no-brainers to you, but I guarantee you that most of them have not been reflected in educational and counseling strategies in the last 40 years. Counselors, for example, are trained not to bring up moral values or religion except as "options" that are available. The modern world of psychology is neutral or even hostile towards religion.

In reflecting on these characteristics, it occurs to me that the Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to offer all of them. We just need to wake up and get moving.

I'll close with one more quote from "Hardwired To Connect": "Much more than it is today, adolescence should become a time for adult engagement with, not retreat from, young people."