

# Adult-Centered Youth Ministry

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For almost 17 years I taught the Youth class (7<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade) at my church. For two years, I served as Associate Pastor with responsibility for all Youth and Children activities. However, as the years went along I had to stop and think and really take an honest and objective assessment of the results we were getting and had gotten over the previous 17 years. In all honesty, I was disappointed in what I was seeing. During that time, I had also become quite convinced we do not need more programs, nor more bells and whistles, nor more activities for our young adults (youth). I was seeing statistics as reported by the George Barna Research Group and Josh McDowell Ministries that showed we were losing our Christian young people to the world in large part by the time they turned 20 years of age. Why? Because many were not truly born again and most were not engaged in the inner working of the church. I became utterly convinced we must raise the bar and integrate our young adults (teens) into the total life of the church.

The Lord began to reveal to me that in order to hold on to our young adults, we needed to concentrate our full, undivided attention on holding them responsible and accountable for their attitudes and behaviors. For sure, I knew some people wouldn't understand. But on the other hand, I knew what the Lord was showing me in His Word regarding moving children to adulthood.

It is time we "raise the bar" for our young people. A truly Biblical and Christ-driven approach can and must form the core of what a church does in regards to the young adults and children attending there. And that core is this: the overall objective in youth work must be to lead teenagers to Christian maturity (1 Tim 4:12). If we are not leading them to mature Christian adulthood, we are spinning our wheels, spending a lot of money on activities and staff, but ultimately are failing to accomplish God's objective for teens: maturity that leads to adulthood.

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Below is a process for leading children, teenagers and young adults to Christian maturity that involves at least four basic commitments on the part of a church.

## **1. Resist the temptation to give in, promote and push an "adolescent" approach to youth ministry.**

Dr. David Black, professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a very dear friend and a mentor of mine, wrote a wonderful book entitled: *The Myth of Adolescence*. It totally changed my understanding of youth ministry and raising and training my own four children. The book details and defines what the Bible teaches about the stages of life. Did you know the Bible has nothing to say about an "adolescent" stage in life? In Scripture, there are two types of people: children and adults. Unfortunately, in our society adolescence has become a waiting period of leisure with few responsibilities and little or no meaningful contact with adults for our young people. This isolation from adults is one of the most harmful developments of adolescence and has provided a breeding ground for the rampant feeling of alienation among our youth today.

According to Dr. Black, the way you can tell that someone believes in an adolescent approach to youth ministry is by the programs they develop to segregate youth from adults. He goes on to say, "*Most youth ministries have their own Sunday School, youth missions, youth small groups, youth worship, youth evangelism teams, youth choir, youth discipleship programs, youth retreats, and youth outings. Youth leaders, who have swallowed the myth of adolescence, assume that by isolating the youth into their own independent subgroup in the church they will be better able to instill in them Christian values. The truth is that this solution is worse than the original problem.*"

Studies show most teens lose interest in the church during the seventh through twelfth grades. This is because they have simply been “entertained.” Seldom do churches today seek to integrate them into the body-life of the church (which involves responsibility, not just fun and games). A church should focus on helping young people make the transition from childhood into adulthood spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. The Bible clearly teaches that it’s the parents (Dads leading) who are the ones responsible for raising their children spiritually (Ephesians 6:1-4, Deut. 6:1-10, Hebrews 12:5-11). Yes, the church should come alongside and help the family do this important work. But, the church should never give the impression to the parents that they (the church) will do the job of spiritually training their kids for them. It’s the churches job to help integrate even young people who don’t have parents actively involved in the church by “adopting” them into families within the church who can help mentor them (Titus 2); thereby showing them what a family structure should look like in our culture today.

## **2. Integrate teens with adults in every typical church setting and activity.**

This is a step that most churches are afraid to take. Why? Because the culture has split our children into “graded” categories in everything they do...from school, to teams and now...even in the church. Some churches today never had the children or teenagers in the regular worship service with the adults. You will never find this occurring in the pages of Scripture...not even once!

Mark DeVries, a former youth pastor, in his book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* said, ***“Teenagers will not learn the skills required of mature adults in a peer-centered youth Sunday-school class. They will not learn these skills by talking with their friends. The process occurs as the less mature repeatedly have opportunity to observe, dialogue and collaborate with the more mature.”***

Many Christian churches across America today are seeing the merit of integrating young adults (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades) into a Sunday School (Bible Study) class that is led by adults and mixed with adults. This class is often called a “Mentoring Class.” This model is taken from Scripture as Jesus modeled discipleship to His young Apostles (whom, scholars tell us were mostly teenagers other than Peter, who was married) and the Apostle Paul with young Timothy and Titus.

Therefore, Youth can and should:

- read Scripture during the worship service
- usher and pass out bulletins
- sing with the adult choir
- help with teaching younger children’s Sunday School classes with their parents
- serve as greeters
- go on missions trips with other adults
- attend “adult” Sunday School classes
- help operate the audio/video equipment for services
- help in all areas of the church (i.e., with preparation and clean-up for meals), etc.

Our young adults do all the above at our church. The wonderful thing about this is the transformation we have seen in our young people. They have “ownership” in what is going on in the church. It’s not just their parent’s church, they say, “It’s my church.” If a young person, or anyone for that matter, feels like they are making a difference and have a stake in what’s going on, they will be much less likely to abandon the church when they leave the church for college or work. Even when they move away for college or work, they will find a church and seek to plug-in. Therefore, it is essential that we ***not*** deny young people this kind of involvement with adults. If we do, we will be sending our teenagers into the world without truly preparing them for the challenges

of adulthood. Ultimately, if they relate only to their peers, they will most likely remain trapped in immaturity. On the other hand, young people who have been fortified with significant adult relationships are consistently the ones who exhibit responsible behavior and who are able to resist involvement in negative behaviors such as rebellion, drug abuse, and promiscuity.

Thus, the most important foundation a youth ministry can have in its work with teens is providing them with opportunities for significant dialogue and relationships with mature Christian adults, which will lead to belonging, involvement and service. This is especially important for those teens who do not come from Christian homes and who therefore need a circle of adult Christians to model the Christian life for them. Again, a church should seek to develop a culture whereby young people in this condition are “adopted” into a family within the church. Yes, this can get messy. But, our young people need more than a room to go to and play video games and eat pizza and have a short devotion. They need to see what a biblical “home” looks like. Churches should seek to take youth who come to their church without parents and “adopt” them into families who have a desire to mentor that young person while they’re at the church and “show them” what a family looks like Scripturally.

### **3. Reject the myth that healthy development among youth requires a strong break with their parents.**

Although peers exercise some control over a teen’s choice of dress, music, and entertainment, only when parents are extremely negligent, do peers exercise more control over the teen’s choice of beliefs and relational styles than their parents. It remains a fact that in the vast majority of cases parents remain the single most important influence in the development of a teen’s character and personality. Children desire experiences with their parents. An article in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, concluded that (1) equating the youth years with inevitable rebellion is inaccurate; (2) the predictable disintegration of parent-teen relationships is false; and (3) teens are more likely to support parental values than to be in conflict with them. This means that more of our programs in church need to be designed for the youth themselves to serve and lead while providing them with mature mentors (which includes their parents).

To implement the ideas detailed above, I implemented what is called: “Rite of Passage” (ROP) in our church. ROP is a process for our young people whereby, when they turn twelve, they can participate in a program that will acknowledge them as a “Young Adult” in the church. This program has been invaluable in letting our young people know what the expectations are of their parents, the church and God, as we take what the Bible says about becoming young adults. We do not have a “youth” pastor, because we don’t see this role depicted in Scripture. I encourage “Youth Pastors” to change their title to “Family Pastor.” Why? Because, the main strategy of a church (regarding young people) should be to come alongside and assist parents in raising Christ-Centered young adults...not doing it for them. Parents, particularly fathers, are going to be held responsible and accountable by the Lord in how they raise, teach and train their children in the discipline of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)

An adult-centered youth ministry is not a program to be added to a church’s educational ministry plan. Instead, it is a *foundational* model with one primary goal: to equip all believers (youth included) to grow toward mature and responsible Christian-adulthood. If this becomes a church’s priority, it will radically affect that church’s philosophy of youth ministry. Instead of trying newer and newer gimmicks to get youth to attend our “programs,” we will simply teach, train and equip our young people and show them that we value, love and appreciate them enough to include them in the body-life of the church.

#### **4. This model is not something “new,” but something “old” that comes directly from the Bible.**

What has been described is not a “new” model or philosophy for youth ministry. It is simply a return to God’s design for the church as detailed in the Bible (Luke 2, Deut. 6, Heb. 12, Eph. 6, and the Proverbs). Jesus had no organizational chart or curriculum. His priority was to call his youthful disciples “to be with him” (Mark 3:14). Jesus’ ministry was relational, and ours should be the same. The Christian faith becomes real to teenagers when they see it lived out in real-life situations. In short, an adult-centered youth ministry is not about creating special programming for young people. The goal is to provide them with the kind of foundational relationships with Christian adults that will lead them to spiritual maturity. In doing so, we seek especially to connect youth from non-traditional homes, (divorced, blended, etc.), with adult mentors. If our youth ministries are to become Biblical and have a meaningful impact, they must reject the traditional model of highly programmed activities and entertainment and instead give the central place to connecting young people to mature Christian adults. Why? Because if we don’t, we will continue to lose our young people to the culture, as they leave our churches in their early 20’s.

Churches should become committed to strengthening families by keeping them together as much as possible. We should be very careful not to over-schedule activities at the church, so we can allow families time to truly be a family during the week. In our church, our teens function in every possible position of service. We work very hard to provide activities which allow participation with adults and in family-oriented settings. The goal is NOT just to group the young adults together for “play” or “entertainment.” We do not want to foster or reinforce to them that they have an identity separate from the rest of the adult community in the church. Please understand, it is not my that God does not work in youth groups, but rather He can accomplish the much, much more when teens are elevated to their high calling within the general body of believers.

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In conclusion, during their teen years, when young adults are told they are not needed by society, they have a special need to “belong” to a community. Thus, while waiting for “adult” status as defined by their culture, they need to have a sense of belonging to a group of people they respect and from whom they can receive recognition. Our churches must rise to the occasion. If we, as adults make the church a community to which young people want to belong, we will be helping our teenagers move more smoothly into mature adulthood. Ultimately, the Body of Christ becomes a significant factor in the moral and spiritual development of our young people. Not surprisingly, when teenagers are treated with respect and are shown that they are valued, they will reject the self-absorption of immaturity and rise to the occasion of becoming a young adult who spiritually flourishes.

To God be the glory!

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