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FAMILY-BASED YOUTH MINISTRY

By Doug Brown, Local Church Ministries Department Chair

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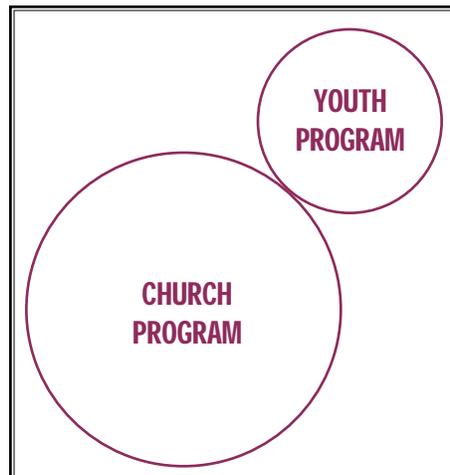
Perhaps no other area of Christian ministry thrives more on trends and fads than youth ministry. It is fascinating to peruse recent youth ministry periodicals and publications and to observe what new innovations youth ministers are trying. Some fads exhibit pure creativity; others push the envelope; a few are even disturbing; but most fade off the scene of youth ministry as soon as they appear. Youth ministers certainly have an inclination to stay on the “cutting edge” of youth culture. However, there is one trend infiltrating the ranks of youth ministry that is more than just a passing fancy; it is called family-based youth ministry.¹ Over the past decade a flurry of articles and books have appeared promoting this new way of doing youth ministry. This article will explain what family-based youth ministry is and how it differs from traditional youth ministry.

What Is Wrong with Traditional Youth Ministry

Many of the advocates for family-based youth ministry are veteran youth workers who have seen weaknesses in traditional youth ministry. Here are some of the weaknesses they have experienced:

Weakness #1: Traditional youth ministry can separate youth from the church body. Some of the most active youth groups across America isolate the youth from the rest of the church. It is scary to consider that a teen could be an active member in the youth group and never connect with the rest of the church body. Stuart Cummings-Bond calls this the “one-eared Mickey Mouse effect,” because just like Mickey’s ear, the youth group only has a tangential connection with the congregation.² Mark DeVries likens this phenomenon of churches working with youth to a mechanic fixing an engine. A mechanic isolates the problem in the car and then fixes it. Instead,

churches should approach youth more as a physician. “Because teenagers are an integral part of the body of Christ, we need to understand this problem as a physician would. When an organ is removed from a living body, that organ dies, and sometimes the body dies with it. The same principle is true in the body of Christ. . . . [T]eenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood as they are connected to the total body of Christ.”³



THE ONE-EARED MICKEY MOUSE

Weakness #2: Traditional youth ministry can cultivate wrong thinking. Traditional youth ministry encourages a “hired-gun” mentality in churches. Some church members believe that hiring a youth pastor can “fix” today’s youth problems. This thinking can lead to a “drive-by-discipleship” mentality among parents, which occurs when parents drive by the church on youth night, drop off their teenagers to be disciplined by the youth pastor, and drive by later to pick them up. Yet throughout the rest of the week, parents are not spiritually involved with their teens. All too often the youth minister fuels this tendency with the attitude, “You bring ‘em, and

I’ll do the rest.” The flip side of this mentality is what Paul Borthwick calls “parent-noia.”⁴ It is not uncommon for youth workers to have negative feelings towards the parents of teenagers in the youth group. “There’s an age-old antagonistic relationship that’s built up between youth ministers and parents. Many youth ministers essentially believe that uninvolved, apathetic parents have abdicated their role as spiritual nurturers, so they’re gonna take that over and do the best they can.”⁵

Weakness #3: Traditional youth ministry is not as effective as it used to be. There is a growing consensus among veteran youth ministers that traditional youth ministry is losing its effectiveness. This is partly due to the fact that teenagers are growing up in America faster than ever. DeVries characterizes today’s teens as the “been-there, done-that” generation. In addition, we are beginning to see that, while traditional youth ministry is effective in getting teens to come to church, it is equally ineffective in retaining them beyond their high school years. Traditional youth ministry all too often fails to bring teens to adult spiritual maturity by helping them to become active members of the body of Christ.

What Is Family-Based Youth Ministry?

First, family-based youth ministry involves a *different philosophy* for youth ministry. Simply put, family-based youth ministry is grounded upon the Biblical conviction that parents are the primary disciplers of their children. Youth ministers have known for years that, as a general rule, children usually emulate the same spiritual fervor of their parents, whether positive or negative. While traditional youth ministry often attempts to fight this reality (e.g., parent-noia), family-based youth ministry accepts it and embraces it. In fact, family-based youth ministry acknowledges that “[p]arents hold the ultimate responsibility

for raising their children, including their teenagers.”⁶ Is this not the Biblical principle expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4-7? “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” Ephesians 6:4 reiterates the same point: “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Thus, the youth minister becomes the assistant to parents as they assume the Biblical responsibility of spiritually nurturing their teenagers. His role is not minimized, but simply refocused on the family as a whole.

Second, family-based youth ministry involves a *different program* for youth ministry. As mentioned, traditional youth ministry often isolates youth from the rest of the church body. In contrast, family-based youth ministry strives for a more balanced, family-friendly program. Here are some programming principles to follow:

1. A family-friendly program considers family schedules and needs when planning activities. Churches should avoid keeping teens out on activities all week long, especially since families are spending less and less time together. Perhaps a family-friendly program would cancel the Thanksgiving weekend retreat since that is traditionally a family time. Sometimes less is more.

2. A family-friendly program plans activities that integrate teenagers with parents. Parents on youth activities? Shocking as it

may sound, many churches are developing a balanced program where teens and parents learn and play together. Teen-only activities are not eliminated, but simply balanced with creative and meaningful parent-teen activities.

3. A family-friendly program intentionally integrates teenagers with the entire church body. This principle answers the primary complaint that some offer about family-based youth ministry--what about the teens whose parents cannot or will not get involved with their teen’s spiritual growth? Family-based youth ministry looks for ways to connect teens with the extended church family, especially with Godly adults. The church body becomes the extended family and helps teenagers make the transition to spiritual adulthood.

4. A family-friendly program seeks to equip parents for family ministry. Youth ministry is a partnership between the youth minister and parents. The church needs to realize that providing parental resources and training is a vital aspect of that youth ministry partnership.

Conclusion

No one is advocating the dissolution of youth ministry. Rather, proponents of family-based youth ministry are arguing for a different way of doing youth ministry. As youth ministers strive to be more effective in the ever-changing world of teenagers, family-based ministry looks promising as a Biblical alternative to traditional youth ministry.

Notes

- 1 Mark DeVries, *Family Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994).
- 2 Stuart Cummings-Bond, “The One-Eared Mickey Mouse,” *Youthworker*, Fall 1989, 76.
- 3 Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 43.
- 4 Paul Borthwick, “How I Cured My Parent-Noia,” *Youthworker*, Spring 1985, 16-19.
- 5 Interview with Ben Freudenberg, “Why Youth Ministry Should Be Abolished,” *Group*, August 1995, 22.
- 6 Paul Borthwick, “How I Cured My Parent-Noia,” 17.



Mr. Doug Brown

Mr. Doug Brown is chair of the Local Church Ministries Department at FBBC&TS. He has his B.A. from FBBC, his M.A. from FBTS, and his M.Div. from Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Mr. Brown has had seven years of experience as a youth pastor.