

REGENT COLLEGE

TRANSFORMING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Although an extraordinarily great percentage of significant spiritual decisions are reached within the first eighteen years of a person's life, many churches struggle to keep a youth pastor even eighteen months. Is this a problem?

Given the present organizational structure of churches in contemporary culture, the simple answer is: yes. This paper seeks first to identify specifically why the apparently short tenure of youth ministers presents a problem, and then drives deeper to discover some of its sources. In identifying the root sources and resultant issues, it becomes possible to propose a variety of specific solutions. Unfortunately, these solutions, while certainly worthy of implementation, require incremental change; and change is difficult. So, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Church should seek a more transformational solution. The surprising conclusion of this study is that an integrated approach to raising children in the Church by involving the whole community may indeed render the traditionally understood role of youth pastor and its attendant issues unnecessary in many of our churches.

Let us first consider some of the data surrounding the importance of the first eighteen years. In his book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna centres his study on children aged five through twelve. His reason is simple: "if you want to shape a person's life – whether you are most concerned about his or her moral, spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional or economic development – it is during these crucial eight years that lifelong habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are formed."¹ His research uncovered that adults who attended church as a child are twice as likely to read the Bible during a typical week as are those who avoided churches when young; twice as likely to attend a church worship service in a typical week; and nearly 50% more likely to pray to God during a typical week.² Adults essentially carry out the beliefs they embraced when they were young. Barna presents four critical outcomes: a person's moral foundations are generally in

¹ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority* (Ventura, California: Regal, 2003) 18.

² George Barna, "Adults Who Attended Church As Children Show Lifelong Effects," *The Barna Update* (November 5, 2001, accessed 09 August 2004); available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx>.

place by the time they reach age nine; a person's response to the meaning and personal value of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection is usually determined before they reach eighteen; in most cases people's spiritual beliefs are irrevocably formed when they are preteens; and adult church leaders usually have had serious involvement in church life and training when they were young.³

As for the tenure of youth pastors, the eighteen month figure probably originates from an article written in 1983 by Paul Borthwick. A credible source with well over a decade in youth ministry in twenty-two years of service on staff at a single church, he wrote: "the general consensus is that the average tenure of a youth minister is not more than eighteen months."⁴ There is however sparse concrete evidence. In surveying a variety of studies, Joe Neill uncovered little support for the eighteen month figure and surfaced some research to suggest more career stability than previously believed. According to one source, the average paid youth minister has 4.2 years of experience and has been at the same church for 3.9 years. Another source reveals that youth ministers stay in one church an average of 4.65 years.⁵ At the end of the same article, after weighing the evidence, Neill concludes: "The best answer I can come up with is that there really is a problem. If there are perceived tenure problems then there are problems – no matter what the statistics say."⁶ The problem was significant enough for the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination to commission an extensive study addressing as a fundamental concern the short tenure of youth pastors. Its data revealed that only 30% of youth ministers were in their present position more than two years.⁷

WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?

"Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matt. 19:13-14)

³ George Barna, "Research Shows That Spiritual Maturity Process Should Start at a Young Age," *The Barna Update* (November 17, 2003, accessed 09 August 2004); available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx>.

⁴ Paul Borthwick, "How to Keep a Youth Minister." *Leadership* vol. iv, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 76.

⁵ Joe Neill, "Staying Power When the Door Looks Soooo Good" *Youthworker* (July/Aug 2004, accessed 11 August 2004): 1-2; available from <http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/power/staying.php>. In this article Neill quotes three sources: Merton Strommen, Karen Jones, Dave Rahn, *Youth Ministry That Transforms* (Zondervan, 2001) chapter 1; Rick Lawrence, "The 18 Month Myth" *Group Magazine* (Jan/Feb 2000); and Jonathan Grenz "Factors Influencing Job or Career Changes among Youth Ministers" *Journal of Youth Ministry* (Fall 2002).

⁶ Neill, "Staying Power," 2.

⁷ Harley T. Atkinson and Fred R. Wilson. "Career Development Cycles and Job Satisfaction of Youth Pastors in the Christian and Missionary Alliance." *Christian Education Journal* vol. xi, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 48.

So why is this short tenure of youth ministers a problem? Veteran youth leaders know that it takes time to break through to youth, teens and their parents in effective ministry. The nature of youth ministry tends to be relational, and lack of fidelity leads to frustration.

In contemporary church environments, the motivation for the involvement of teenagers in church-related activities tends to be relational, rather than spiritual. If this is the case, when the relational networks change upon graduation from high school or college, we can expect a continued decline in church attendance among the emerging generation.⁸

Matthew 28:20b reads: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” According to Kenda Creasy Dean: “Few lines of Scripture sound more reassuring – or less likely – to young people than Jesus’ promise at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Contemporary culture offers little assurance that anything will be with them always.”⁹ The church reinforces this insecurity when youth ministries lack consistency. Teenagers respond best to relationships that are stable and trustworthy. Youth take a long time to open up to people, requiring that we build youth ministries with leaders who are ready to be long-term friends and pastors.

Each time a youth leader leaves, it is difficult for the group to avoid feelings of rejection and frustration – as if they are being shown that they are not important. Frustration hinders the effectiveness of ministry and impacts attitudes toward the church that last well into adulthood.

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM

In her book, Dean identifies four common misconceptions surrounding youth ministry: adolescence is a deficient form of adulthood; Christian youth programs solve problems youth face; youth ministry’s primary purpose is to ensure the church of tomorrow; and youth ministry is primarily about youth.¹⁰ These misconceptions both flow from and contribute to three source challenges – a culture of segregation; perceived

⁸ Barna, “Lifelong Effects.”

⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004) 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

stylistic differences; and a crisis in theological depth – and are in part responsible for the creation of the youth minister’s position. But because the problems are systemic, a number of issues arise, all pointing to a subtle lack of respect for the position.

The growth of denominational programs in American Sunday schools owed much to Horace Bushnell’s emphasis on the church’s role in nurturing childhood faith, but his biographer, Margaret Bendroth, fears he may have regretted the institutional isolation of children from adult worship, when what he advocated was their full participation in every aspect of church life.¹¹ Today it seems that adults meet in the sanctuary while youth meet in the youth room; adults worship on Sunday morning while youth do devotions Sunday evening; adults participate in missions while the youth do service projects; and adults hear sermons while youth hear talks. The result is that young people feel more ‘set aside’ than ‘set apart’. This is the age-segregation of American institutional life that began at the turn of the last century as the one-room school house was gradually phased out.¹² Today, our culture continues to segment the population for marketing purposes. Regrettably the congregational church has ‘bought into’ the concept without adequately investigating its consequences.

Blame it on postmodernism, the generation gap, or whatever you will, but teens seem to have little patience for institutional forms of religious expression. There is, however, a significant difference between what young people want and what they need or honestly think is appropriate. At formative stages especially, children do not know what they need; they require adult direction and they need boundaries. Whether the differences are real or partly perceived, they are most certainly exacerbated by continued divisions.

Simply because stylistic differences exist, capacity for theological depth need not be compromised. Dean laments, however: “For most of the twentieth century, mainline Protestants have done youth ministry in the shallow end of the theological pool.”¹³ “When youth ministry draws its primary energy from special events, ‘cool’ leaders, and high-voltage youth gatherings more than from the long tradition of practices through which

¹¹ Margaret Bendroth, “Horace Bushnell’s Christian Nurture” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, Marcia J. Bunge, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001) 356.

¹² Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 162.

youth identify with the life, death and resurrection of Christ, we communicate a version of faith that has no analogy in the adult church – or in real life for that matter.”¹⁴

Segregation, stylistic differences and the dumbing down of theology seem to mandate a dedicated professional for ministering to youth. Due at least in part to the misconceptions described above, a number of issues arise in this position. Neill lists several in his article: time conflict between job demands and personal needs, and between administrative duties and youth contact; a disconnect between students and church; a disinterested or apathetic youth group; inadequate salary; inadequate budget; greater opportunity for successful work in new positions; conflict with the senior pastor; unhealthy spiritual environment; and disillusionment.¹⁵ Neill summarizes all of these issues as deriving from a “subtle lack of respect” for the position of youth minister and balances his comments with the acceptance of at least some responsibility on the part of youth ministers: “if youth ministers have lost respect, it’s probably from us doing stupid things.”¹⁶ I conditionally agree. The beginning of any solution is the acceptance of responsibility, but as long as misconceptions exist the problems will survive.

PATCHING THE PROBLEM

While cause and effect continue to blur, there are seven common deficiencies for which Borthwick and others suggest solutions: calling, gifting, vision, support, recognition, energy, and experience. Without addressing these, the position of youth minister becomes merely a stopping point along the way to something else.

Many youth ministers fail simply out of an absence of calling. It becomes incumbent upon the church to affirm the call. Younger servants in particular may need assistance in understanding the concept of call and the biblical model of congregational involvement in such decisions.

Another and related area is a genuine lack of gifting, fit or ability. A disinterested or apathetic youth group may simply be pointing to a problem in leadership. An especially deplorable practice is the use of the youth group as a ministry tryout area. Without specific gifting, this can be a setup for failure for the individual

¹⁴ Ibid., 168.

¹⁵ Neill, “Staying Power,” 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

involved, and sends a clear message to the congregation that the treatment of the younger generation is somehow less critical than adult ministry. Candidates must clearly consider their gifting.

Every leader needs a clear vision for ministry. The lack of vision is a third area where the youth minister can fall down. Ministers should be encouraged to set personal and ministry goals and to see their ministry as a process and not just a yearly program.

Another major area of concern is an ongoing lack of support within the congregation. The youth minister should be encouraged to continue to study. They should always lead through a team supplied by the laity. They should receive support in front of parents as well as training in relating well to parents. The odds are shifting in favour of more qualified youth ministers as a result of formal youth ministry majors. An essential addition to this would include a deliberate mentoring program and a spiritual director.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance's study suggests pastors at the beginning of their careers likely do not receive the recognition for their efforts that their more seasoned colleagues do.¹⁷ This lack of recognition harms the possibility of longevity. The youth minister needs to be an integral part of the church's overall leadership team. There should be opportunity to grow beyond youth ministry. Some churches encourage their staff to have a 'major' and a 'minor' so that they are involved in at least two types of ministry at differing levels. There should also be opportunity to grow outside the church through observing or working with other groups and interacting with others in youth ministry. Pay must be relative to responsibilities, education and experience.

Another intimidating aspect of youth ministry is the relentless need to 'be there' for the kids – a lack of endless energy. Youth ministers must learn to guard their personal life and to have relationships outside of teenagers. This is essentially the concept of Sabbath-keeping.

The final area of deficiency is in experience. New ministers need time to grow before they are expected to assume positions of leadership. Says Neill: "If we're funneling all the newbies into youth ministry, what should we realistically expect regarding tenure?"¹⁸

¹⁷ Atkinson and Wilson, "Career Development Cycles," 49.

¹⁸ Neill, "Staying Power," 3.

Without addressing these deficiencies, a frequent result is that the position is used as a stepping stone to other ministries. This attitude is so prevalent that some denominations even use it as mandatory home service for missionary candidate preparation. If the youth pastor is considered a junior minister, it should be natural to expect eager transitions to other positions, such as ‘senior’ pastor.

The view that youth ministry is a place where pastoral leaders ‘do time’ until they qualify for ‘real’ ministry is alive and well, thanks to the self-defeating practice of throwing clergy, seminarians, and unsuspecting volunteers with little experience and less support into positions where adolescents, searching for fidelity, demand more than we have to give.¹⁹

TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIONAL SOLUTION

Change is certainly necessary if we are to move beyond the revolving door into and out of youth ministry, but some of these symptoms may be pointing to a larger issue. Perhaps the church needs not a tune-up but a transformation.

Change is a shift that may or may not last, tends to happen at a discrete and identifiable moment in time and is often incremental in nature – almost imperceptible in many cases. Transformation, however, is an enduring process in which the person is radically reformed and does not revert to his or her previous condition.²⁰

The same is possible of organizations.

Marva Dawn tells us: “The dominant culture never has to worry about character formation because its principles and morals are easily imbibed.”²¹ The problem is that Christianity is no longer the dominant culture. The church is called to be an alternate and parallel society and this must be intentional and deliberate. “The reason why Christians are so similar in their attitudes, values and lifestyles to non-Christians is that they were not sufficiently challenged to think and behave differently – radically differently, based on core spiritual perspectives – when they were children.”²² Fortunately, teenagers will settle for nothing less than passion – something worth suffering for, and children come with a simple faith worth emulating. “He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the

¹⁹ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 90.

²⁰ Barna, *Transforming Children*, 97-98.

²¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997) 6.

²² George Barna, “Spiritual Maturity Process” (November 12, 2003).

greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’” (Matthew 18:2-4) Spiritual heritage must be passed from one generation to the next.

The transformational solution steers away from the role of youth pastor and toward community and an integrated approach to ministry that redefines the expectations of the leader.

“The mandate to ‘be there’ for young people belongs to the Christian *community*, not to any individual or group of individuals.”²³ The task begins with church-permeating prayer for children and families. Barna’s research points also to the importance of families taking the lead in the spiritual development of children. Many of the essays edited by Bunge emphasize the importance of parents in the nurturing of children. Raising and educating children are seen as important tasks requiring cooperative effort between the home, church, community and state. Bushnell, Chrysostom, and Schleiermacher all describe the family as a “little church.”²⁴ The primary agent of grace is the family, not the church. “Religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic.”²⁵ Barna’s survey data indicates that parents generally rely upon their church to do all of the religious training. It is not so much that they are unwilling as they are ill-equipped. Churches only get one or two hours with a child, while parents have them all week. The more willingly churches play the co-dependent role in this drama, the less likely we are to see spiritually healthy families and a generation of young people who grow into mature believers.²⁶ What churches need to do instead is prepare parents more adequately to handle the responsibility of their own children’s spiritual growth. “The community’s and the pastor’s primary task concerning parents is to help them keep God first in their lives.”²⁷ This will require considerable personal contact from the churches. “If we want to nourish in them godly character and the desire to choose God’s will over the allures of the world, it is critical that we begin when they are small to invite them into the delight of being different.”²⁸

²³ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 91.

²⁴ Marcia J. Bunge, ed. *The Child in Christian Thought*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001) 356, 64-65, and 333.

²⁵ Bendroth *The Child in Christian Thought*, 356, quoting Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (NY: Scribner, 1861; reprint Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

²⁶ George Barna, “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness,” *The Barna Update* (November 17, 2003, accessed 09 August 2004); available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx>.

²⁷ Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause?* 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

Research shows that church leaders are surprisingly uninformed as to the spiritual content and practices related to their children's ministry. Most are simply interested in acquiring a turnkey curriculum. Interestingly, while 41 percent of those attending churches are under the age of 18, only 15 percent of church budgets are allocated to children and youth ministries. Children are sometimes mistakenly considered a 'loss leader' or seen as 'bait' in order to attract adult ministry.²⁹ While finances are not the issue, evidence of priority certainly is.

Church leaders need to clearly understand the facts:

People are much more likely to accept Christ as Savior when they are young. Absorption of biblical information and principles typically peaks during preteen years. Attitudes about the viability and value of church participation form early in life. Habits related to the practice of one's faith develop when one is young and change surprisingly little over time.³⁰

"If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people's lives; and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young."³¹ What is required is an internally consistent approach.

An integrated approach might radically alter or redefine the role of youth pastor. In a substantial number of the churches surveyed by Barna with really effective ministries to children, there is no one staff member dedicated to leading the children's ministry.³² As an alternate society, church needs to be intergenerational. Young people can participate according to their gifting as parts of the Body. Every child should be personally involved in some form of ministry. The pastor's role becomes that of an advocate for the youth. In Matthew 21:15-16, the chief priests and teachers of the law were indignant because the children were shouting praise in the temple area, but Jesus defended them. Perhaps children 'get it' earlier and we really do still have something to learn from them. "Invariably, the churches where the children's ministry prospers are those led by pastors who are unapologetic advocates for that ministry focus."³³

As priority of the entire church shifts toward the nurturing of children, the requirement for a dedicated individual assigned to children or youth is actually diminished. In many congregations the lead pastor could be expected to fulfill the requirement. Only in congregations where size truly prohibits, or where the lead pastor is

²⁹ Barna, *Transforming Children*, 39-41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, 104.

somehow unable to relate to children, might a staff member be required. The unfortunately titled 'senior' pastor (where the individual is occasionally neither older nor more established) carries with it the implication that all other pastors are junior.

CONCLUSION

In light of overwhelming evidence that faith decisions are grounded in the early years of a person's life and the counterproductively short tenure of youth pastors, we do indeed have a problem. It simply takes a commitment of time to impact young lives. Although answers are readily available to the issues of youth leadership and have been successfully implemented in some congregations, the pervasiveness of the problem points to a subtle lack of respect not only for the position of youth minister, but for the focus of their ministry as well. As a result, the position continues to be treated as a stepping-stone to more satisfying ministry. A transformational shift to a truly alternate society where the last come first and titles are set aside in favour of following the example of Jesus remains our highest hope.

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