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Youth Ministry in the Emerging Culture

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YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE EMERGING CULTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE EMERGING CULTURE

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To God be the glory!

ABSTRACT

Title: YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE EMERGING CULTURE

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Youth ministry is a relatively new endeavor for Christianity in the West. In its short history, youth ministry became a major aspect of Christian churches and Christian activity. This project focuses on youth ministry in the emerging culture. The problem is that an increasing percentage of Americans leave their Christian faith behind when they enter adulthood. The paper examines the latest research into the emerging culture and youth ministry, and it provides a practical approach to youth ministry in the emerging culture. The thesis is that youth ministries can connect effectively with teenagers through missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational strategies that meet the needs and fit the mindset of members of the emerging culture inside and outside the church.

Chapter 1 presents the problem. Many teenagers leave the church and their faith behind after high school as evidenced by their lack of church attendance, in spite of existing youth ministries. Chapter 2 looks at the history of youth ministry in the West and the theological framework for youth ministry in the emerging culture. Chapters 3-6 address the problem and examine four aspects of youth ministry in the emerging culture: missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational. Each concept is examined in its historical and theological context, and the emerging youth ministry application is

described. Chapter 7 concludes with a history that explicates the conclusions and provides practical applications.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:18-20¹

The Story

“I just don’t know why my daughter has fallen away from the church; she was so involved and connected.” Sound familiar? Jessica grew up a Christian and attended church with her family on a regular basis. As she got older, the lure of the youth group and all the fun the older kids had filled her heart and mind with anticipation. She couldn’t wait to get into high school and join the youth group. When high school finally came, Jessica immediately attended all the youth ministry functions. She attended the youth worship service, joined a youth small group, participated in the mid-week youth group activities, went on youth mission trips, youth gatherings, and youth retreats. As she got older, Jessica became a leader in the youth ministry. She sang in the youth band that lead the youth worship experience. She became a small group leader and served on the youth

¹ All scriptural references are from the New International Version (NIV).

ministry leadership team. Jessica's faith seemed to flourish during this time in her life; she was a mature faithful Christian.

Then Jessica graduated high school and left home for college. When she came home for Christmas break or summer vacation, however, Jessica had little interest in church. Her mother could not figure out what had happened. She invited Jessica to church with her, but Jessica showed little interest in developing her faith. Church lost its appeal. Jessica did not connect with the adults in the congregation, and she was too old to stay in the high school youth group, so she stayed home instead. She put her faith on the shelf with the other things from her past; things that were no longer useful, current, or needed.

Christianity in the United States is declining among young adults age 18-35, but more teenagers attend church than the 18-35 group. This suggests the great importance of youth ministry as the church looks to connect with young adults. This paper deals with these issues.

The Context

Youth ministry may be the last opportunity for church contact with teenagers, and what they learn, how they connect, how their faith grows, and how they integrate into the life of the congregation may determine their future church connections. A recent wave of research and books report about the emerging generations and their connection to the Church in the United States. Dan Kimball's *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*,² and

² Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyon's *UnChristian*³ focus on the views of young Americans age 18-35 who consider themselves outside the Christian Church and faith. These young Americans completed high school and are older than the traditional youth ministry group, although many youth ministries cultivate college age and young adults. Kimball, Kinnaman, and Lyon's research focuses on the outcome of youth ministry, and this post-high school youth group is a test for the success of youth ministry. The authors conclude that youth ministry in the emerging culture require evaluation and re-imagination.

Kimball writes, "We are living in an increasingly 'post-Christian' culture. America once was more of a 'Christian nation' whose influences and values were aligned with a Judeo-Christian values and ethics."⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons conducted research through the Barna Group and echo Kimball. The research revealed that young adults outside the Christian faith "have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders . . . It alters their willingness to commit their lives to Jesus."⁵ They admit the church has always had critics, but they are becoming increasingly vocal: "And the aversion and hostility are, for the first time, crystallizing in the attitudes of millions of young Americans. A huge chunk of a new generation has concluded they want nothing to do with us. As Christians, we are widely mistrusted by a skeptical generation."⁶

³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

⁴ Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*, 15.

⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

This research and books report on persons over the age of 18 who are considered beyond youth ministry. Similar research focuses on teenagers aged 13-18, and it describes important differences from the older cohort. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton conducted a large scale study on the spiritual lives of American teenagers and report the results, summaries, and conclusions in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. According to Smith and Denton, only about 18 percent of American teenagers have never attended religious services. They also note that “Nearly two thirds of American teens who never attend services have been invited by someone to attend religious services in the prior two years.”⁷ Smith and Denton note that many teenagers of the 13-18 age group are connected to a local congregation. The younger generation does not express the skepticism, hostility, and negative associations reported by older, emerging generations, noted by Kimball and Kinnaman. Smith and Denton describe this contradiction:

Although academic adolescent researchers have more recently come significantly to revise this picture of normal adolescence, many books about teenagers and religion continue to employ the storm and stress master frame in ways that set teenagers’ religious values and interests in opposition to those of adults. They depict youth as alone, disillusioned, irreverent, uniquely postmodern, belonging to something that is next and in search of an authentic faith different from that of existing adult religion, which simply isn’t cutting it. Such stereotypical cultural frames lead to the clear impression that, when it comes to faith and religion, contemporary teenagers are deeply restless, alienated, rebellious, and determined to find something that is radically different from the phase in which they were raised.

But that impression is fundamentally wrong. What we learned by interviewing hundreds of different kinds of teenagers all around the country is that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in their

⁷ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103.

religious identity and practices. Very few are restless, alienated, or rebellious; rather, the majority of US teenagers seemed basically content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning.⁸

It appears that as post high school individuals move into young adulthood their views begin shifting. Kinnaman and Lyons note,

In 1996, our firm released the report “Christianity has a strong positive image despite fewer active participants” we discovered that 85% were favorable toward Christianity's role in society.—These days nearly 2 out of every five young outsiders (38%) claim to have a “bad impression of present-day Christianity.”—though these hard-core critics represent a minority of young outsiders, this group is at least three times larger than it was just a decade ago.⁹

Contrast that view with Smith and Denton’s comments:

The vast majority of US teenagers are simply *not* only not hostile to or rebellious against religion generally or the faith tradition of their parents specifically. They are also quite content to believe what their parents believe, what they’ve been taught to believe. In this way, for most teens, religion is taken as part of the furniture of their lives, not a big deal, just taken for granted as fine the way it is.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

These reports indicate that most young Americans consider themselves Christian and are connected to a local congregation. At the same time, more and more 18-35 year olds disconnect from the church and the faith of their childhood. Important questions are: Why? What causes young people to disconnect from their childhood churches? How can youth ministry programs improve and avoid pitfalls?

⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁹ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 24.

¹⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 122.

Thesis

Youth ministries can connect effectively with teenagers through missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational strategies that meet the needs and fit the mindset of members of the emerging culture inside and outside the church so that the next generation will know and love Jesus, seek to serve Him and follow His ways all the days of their lives.

Definitions of Terms

Attractional: A ministry tactic designed to draw people to the church and youth ministry through quality programming and events.

Colonial: The latest and most effective ministry plan, program, or system that works for one church and should work for other churches.

Incarnational: The word of God in action through the lives of believers. As the incarnation of Jesus Christ brought God into this world, incarnational ministry embodies the active love of God in the world.

Intergenerational: Connections between generations that unites them into one community focused on mentorship, friendship, and accountability.

Missional: An approach to community similar to missionary approaches to new mission fields designed to connect with the local customs, culture, and language and bring Christ's love, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit's power to people.

Propositional: A list of essential statements individuals must believe to be saved and become Christian.

Relational: A focus on relationships and community for the benefit of the Kingdom of God.

Youth Ministry: For the purpose of this study, church-based programs for junior high through senior high teenagers, 7th through 12th grade.

Overview

What challenges face youth ministry in the emerging culture? How should youth ministry function to be faithful to God's word, connect with teenagers and their world, help them build relationships with God, peers, parents, congregations, live Christ's love in the world, share life with other generations, and mentor, model, and transform the next generation? This study examines effective elements of past youth ministry programs and explores new programs designed to teach, exhort, and train the next generation of Christ's disciples.

Chapter 2 describes the theological foundation of youth ministry and the paper's biblical framework. It provides a brief history of youth ministry in the Lutheran Church as a problem-solving basis.

Chapter 3 presents a missional youth ministry model in comparison to attractional ministry model. Mission trips have functioned for decades, but the emerging youth ministry model goes beyond mission trips and becomes truly missional. This means churches see their communities as mission fields. A missionary must take the gospel message and adapt it to the culture and customs of the indigenous people in order to make bridges and paths to Jesus. This shift in philosophy changes the shape of youth meetings,

worship experiences, evangelism, outreach, and community. It requires church leaders and laypersons learn the language, customs, and stories of potential converts, just as missionaries do upon entering a new culture. Missionaries go out into the world, bring Jesus to the people, and translate the gospel into the native language. Contemporary churches may have become too attractional, designed to draw people to the church rather than going out to them. Emerging youth ministry goes out into the local community.

Chapter 4 compares relational youth ministry with propositional ministry programs. Genuine relationships, meaningful connections, and authentic motivations set the stage for relational youth ministry. Many church members have focused on teenagers as numbers and manipulated relationships and conversations for the church's benefit. Relational youth ministry practitioners love teenagers as beautiful creations of God the Father and build connections to non-churched youth. Relational youth ministry provides teenagers opportunities to build relationships with Jesus Christ, other teens, youth ministers, parents, and adults. In *Postmodern Pilgrims* Leonard Sweet writes, "Postmoderns want participation in a deeply personal but at the same time communal experience of the divine and the transformation of life that issues from that identification with God."¹¹

New technologies connect and isolate individuals simultaneously. Many people connect to almost everyone they know through cell phones, PDAs, the internet, and text messaging, but these technologies also keep them isolated and alone. Teenagers crave

¹¹ Leonard I. Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 112.

relationships, and too often they find them in harmful ways. The church can provide a loving place for teens to connect, grow, learn, share, fail, fall, and flourish.

Chapter 5 presents a case for incarnational youth ministry which is different from a colonial ministry. Jesus was the incarnation, the word of God made flesh (John 1:1-5, 14). Christians can live incarnational lives and embody the word of God in action. In *Emerging Churches*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger describe how emerging churches connect with God's work and mission:

Jesus proclaimed the good news that his hearers could join him in a new way of life. More than simply offering a message of personal salvation, Jesus invited his followers to participate in God's redemption of the world. Emerging churches have adopted this restored understanding of the gospel, and it has dramatically transformed the way they train both new and not-so-new Christians in the faith.¹²

Teenagers can learn, grow, and incorporate life lessons through action, experience, and participation. Incarnational ministry identifies orphans and widows, the poor and oppressed in the community, and shares Christ's love with them. Persons involved in this ministry serve others, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick and imprisoned.

Chapter 6 describes the overwhelming need and power of intergenerational youth ministry. Research reports the necessity of adult mentoring relationships for teenagers' growth in the faith and connection with the Christian church community. Research demonstrates the importance of parents and guardians in teenagers' faith development process. Parents, guardians, grandparents, and all other adult relationships are the most

¹² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 56.

influential factors in faith development. In *Soul Searching* Smith and Denton assert, “Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”¹³ Children mimic their parents’ faith, and they learn what is important from their parents.

These realities require that the emerging church form partnerships with parents. Past youth ministry programs acted independently from parents and adult congregants, and established youth rooms, youth nights, youth worship, youth small groups, and youth leadership. Chap Clark classifies similar behaviors as abandonment of children and teenagers.¹⁴ Patricia Hersch notes the same dynamic in *A Tribe Apart* and suggests American parenting methods require that teenagers raise themselves without adult influence in their own “tribes.”¹⁵

Chapter 6 also discusses the important role of adult congregants. Clark writes, “Adolescents are desperate for adults who care enough to look beneath the surface of their layered living, to stand beside them in the midst of their inconsistency, and to gently and patiently lead, shepherd, and guide them into adulthood.”¹⁶ The adult role is important for two reasons: First, it provides relationships for mentoring, training, loving,

¹³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.

¹⁴ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers, Youth, Family, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 47.

¹⁵ Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Random House, 1998), viii-ix.

¹⁶ Clark, *Hurt*, 187.

and nurturing. Second, it connects teenagers with the congregation and the adult world.

The emergent church can break into the youth subculture and connect teenagers with a congregation's life and adults. Chapter 7 concludes the paper and presents practical steps for youth ministry that is missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

—Matthew 7:24-27

A Youth Ministry History

The development of a youth ministry theology requires a review of youth ministry's origins, what lead to its standardization, and its future potential in the United States. The theology of youth ministry in many ways follows the theology of ministry for adults. Gary Zustiak writes in *Youth Ministry That Leaves a Mark*, "The beginnings of youth ministry in America could be seen as early as 1724 when Cotton Mather organized societies to sustain the faith of young people."¹ Contemporary youth ministry can be traced back to key events and developments in United States history. The first key event was the creation of Sunday school begun by Robert Raikes in England in 1780. In *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn write,

¹ Gary Blair Zustiak, *Student Ministry That Leaves a Mark: Changing Youth to Change the World* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2003), 11.

The Sunday school movement began in England during the Industrial Revolution as a way to provide an education to children who worked in the factories during the week. Since these children could not attend weekday school with wealthy young people, they met for Sunday school. Although the Bible was the primary textbook used in the Sunday schools (it was the primary text for the weekday schools as well), catechesis, or 'handing on' the beliefs and practices of Christian tradition, was secondary to the goals of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic.²

The Sunday school model came to America in 1785 when William Elliot opened one in Virginia. Over the next several decades, Sunday schools appeared all over the East Coast and into the Mississippi valley. Soon the idea of teaching children who could not go to weekday schools shifted toward teaching Christian values, ethics, and Bible stories. In *History of Christian Education* C. B. Eavey writes, "It became less and less a literacy program and increasingly a gospel agency."³

The Sunday school movement is important to the development of youth ministry for two reasons. First, it was the first age specific ministry within the church. Second, the concept of faith development and nurture was outsourced from the family and home, to the teacher and pastor in the local congregation.

The next historical milestone that led to the development of youth ministry in the United States was the birth of the YMCA, which was the next step from the Sunday school. While Sunday schools were designed for younger children, the YMCA and YWCA were designed for young men and women. The YMCA, or Young Men's Christian Association, began in England in 1844 and came to the United States in 1851. It

² Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn, *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 80.

³ C. B. Eavey, *History of Christian Education* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 230.

was followed by a similar association for young women, the YWCA. "Initially the purpose of the YMCA was 'to help Christian young people retain their Christian commitments after they had moved into the urban jungles where jobs were available.'"⁴

The YMCA and YWCA targeted a specific age group for ministry. For example, the YMCA sought to nurture the faith of young men who were away from home and seeking employment.

The next major precursor to youth ministry was the creation of the public high school, which helped create the sociological phenomenon of adolescence. These developments began at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and identified a third life stage. No longer did children become adults at the onset of puberty; instead, adolescents were between childhood and adulthood, physically maturing, but free from adult responsibilities like work and family. Dean, Clark, and Rahn write about the onset of the age of adolescents and how it solidified in American culture. The age of the onset of puberty dropped while at the same time, the average age of marriage rose and increased the time period between childhood and adulthood.

In 1875, the United States Supreme Court allowed taxes to be spent on secondary education. This inaugurated the new high school era, extended the time period between childhood and adulthood, and kept students in school and out of the work force. By 1918 every state in the union had adopted high schools, enforced attendance policies, and mandated that young people remain in school through at least age sixteen.⁵ Dean, Clark,

⁴ Dean, Clark, and Rahn, *Starting Right*, 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

and Rahn write, "The Great Depression and World War II solidified the identity of adolescence as a new sociological phenomenon in America. By 1930 high school enrollment in American had increased to over 6.6 million students and the existence of adolescent culture could no longer be denied."⁶ Six point six million adolescent youth were without the responsibility of a full time job, the pressures of marriage, family rearing, and had free time. This created a perfect environment and need for youth ministry.

The Society for Christian Endeavor may be considered the first youth ministry movement. Francis E. Clark and his wife Harriet Clark started the society for youth to continue in their faith development after their conversion experience. "The original objective of the society was 'to promote an earnest Christian life among its members, to increase their mutual acquaintance, and to make them more useful in the service to God.'"⁷

In *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry*, Mark Senter writes,

[The] Christian Endeavor movement [led] to many denominational replicas. He says, The Christian Endeavor idea was designed to sustain a spiritual awakening among young people. Fulfilling the pledge kept members endeavored to discover God in what Clark considered historically proven ways. Even risking a type of legalism, which could creep into the prescribed disciplines, the founder felt the possible danger was worth the hazard. But soon after denominational societies were formed, new lives inhabited the "shell." The new societies broadened their focus to include teaching denominational loyalty, and leadership development.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁸ Mark Senter, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1992), 68.

The various denominational groups included the Luther league, Walther league, Epworth League, and Westminster Fellowship. The Society for Christian Endeavor, and its various replicas, focused on the care and nurture of young people within Christian congregations.

Dean, Clark, and Rahn discuss how this inward focus led to new ministry opportunities. For example, Lloyd Bryant felt God's calling in his life to reach teenagers in 1929. He was specifically interested in large group activities designed to reach millions of teens with no religious connections. This calling led Bryant to start the Christian Youth Campaign of America, and rallies met in Times Square in New York City attracted large crowds on Monday and Tuesday nights. In 1935 the name was changed to The Association of Christian Youth in America, and the ministry structure was modeled after the Young Life Campaign in England.⁹

Young Life and Youth for Christ have played a large role in the development of youth ministry. "After World War II, parachurch youth movements like Young Life and Youth for Christ stressed the doctrine of personal salvation, which they believed mainstream congregational youth programs had overlooked."¹⁰ Together with programs in congregational settings, youth ministry focused on Christian ideals, nurture and evangelism, growth and discipleship, and in-reach and out-reach.

In the late 1960s, the first independent resource developer aimed specifically at youth ministry began, and a new era of parachurch organizations focused on youth programs. By the 1980s, every church sought a youth minister to run its youth ministry

⁹ Dean, Clark, and Rahn, *Starting Right*, 87.

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

program. By the end of the 1990s, youth ministers and youth ministry programs looked towards mega-churches for direction on how to create ministry opportunities.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, youth ministry leaders asked why their programs appeared ineffective. Research was conducted, and study after study confirms the ineffectiveness of youth ministry in the United States. In *Rethink: Decide for Yourself, Is Student Ministry Working?* Steve Wright describes the results of youth ministry from a variety of studies:

- A recent *TIME* Magazine article points to research that found 61 percent of the adults polled who are now in their twenties said they had participated in church activities as teens but no longer do. Some argue that young people typically drift from organized religion in early adulthood, but others say the high attrition is a sign that churches need to change the way they try to engage the next generation.
- A study from UCLA found that almost half of college students drift away from their Christian upbringing. While 52 percent of incoming students said that they regularly took part in church events, the number shrinks to 29 percent who are still involved in church activities by their junior year.
- Josh McDowell estimates, “over 69 percent of youth are leaving traditional church after high school.”
- LifeWay Christian Research reports, “The overwhelming majority of children from evangelical families are leaving the church as they enter adulthood.”
- Mark Matlock finds, “Depending on whose numbers you use, 58 percent – 84 percent of graduating youth from church youth groups are not returning.”
- David Wheaton, author of *University of Destruction*, states that “as many as 50 percent of Christian students say they have lost their faith after four years of college.”
- George Barna gives troubling news in his book, *Real Teens*: “Now only 33 percent of church youth say that the church will play a part in their lives when they leave home.”
- Glenn Schultz at LifeWay Christian Resources estimates that 75 percent of young people leave church in their late teens and aren’t reconnecting later.
- Student Venture reports that about 70 percent of seniors in high school who claimed faith, stop attending church during the college years.
- Ron Luce in *Battle Cry for a Generation* estimates “88 percent of kids raised in Christian homes do not continue to follow the Lord after they graduate from high school.”

- LifeWay Research found that 70 percent of young adults ages twenty-three to thirty stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.¹¹

Wright reviews the current model of youth ministry and compares it to the results of recent studies on the model's effectiveness. He concludes, "The goal isn't our programs, our events, or our model, but that everyone remains in Christ and becomes complete in Him. Today's model is failing in those tasks a majority of the time."¹²

The effectiveness of youth ministry and its long term success were described by Alvin Reid:

Years ago I sat in a meeting with church leaders from across the nation. They had convened to discuss evangelizing America, and a leader in evangelizing young people shared with me a statistic that shook me: over the preceding twenty years the number of full-time youth pastors had grown dramatically, and a plethora of magazines, music, and ideas aimed at youth had been birthed along the way. Meanwhile, during that same time span, the numbers of young people won to Christ dropped at about as fast a rate.¹³

Reid uses statistics compiled by the North American Mission Board and reports 88 percent of church youth drop out of church after high school.¹⁴

George Barna reports in his book *Real Teens* that, "Barely one-third of white and Hispanic teens, along with two-fifths of black teens, say they are likely to continue to attend a Christian church in the future, while they are living independently of their

¹¹ Steve Wright with Chris Graves, *Rethink: Decide for Yourself, Is Student Ministry Working?* (Wake Forest, NC: InQuest, 2007), 18.

¹² Ibid., 37.

¹³ Alvin L. Reid, *Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 44.

parents.”¹⁵ Barna writes, “While youth ministry has become a standard ministry program in tens of thousands of churches . . . there has been surprising little growth in the involvement of teenagers in the life of the Church over the past decade.”¹⁶

The question is, What went wrong? What happened to the well intentioned plans of youth ministers? There may be a thousand ways to answer this question, but this paper describes what youth ministry has become, discusses why it does not work, and describes what youth ministry can be in the emerging culture. The goal is a ministry that connects with teenagers in a God-pleasing, scripturally mandated, and more effective way.

Attractional, Propositional, and Colonial Approaches

As youth ministry developed, it adopted attractional, propositional, and colonial techniques designed to attract students into youth Christian ministries and to Jesus. Churches built bigger buildings, designed fancy youth rooms, created specialized ministries for teenagers with big bands, expensive sound systems, extensive lighting, and innovative speakers. The goal was to be on the cutting edge of ministry with a willingness to try anything to attract youth into churches, which was the number one priority. The “Bridge” is an example of an attractional youth ministry organization as described on their web page: “The Bridge is equal parts ministry and attraction. On the

¹⁵ George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

one hand, we are striving to be the new Main Street. The place where you go to be with your friends.”¹⁷

The problem with attractional ministry is competition, because the secular world has many arenas that entertain teenagers. Teenagers are one of the most sought after demographic groups because of the amount of disposable income they control, and companies spend millions of dollars trying to attract teenagers into their business. The church cannot compete with this, nor should it try. Steve Wright states, “Once they have experienced years of fun-and-games, all-you-can-eat, no-responsibility, free-from-parents amusement, then we have helped train their appetites for pleasure to find more alluring fulfillment in the adult world.”¹⁸

Youth ministry also used propositional techniques. Rather than connecting students to the living God who transforms lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, students receive a prayer to speak, a few propositions to follow, and a list of dos and don’ts. Propositional advocates believe the God of the universe is knowable through a few thoughts or statements. Propositional ministry practitioners suggest that the church and youth group have the right information, and students should come each week and learn a little more. The Missiology.org web page posts,

Churches developed during the Modern era generally exist to dispense information. Unbelievers become Christians by receiving new information and grow in Christ to become leaders through enhanced understandings. The role of the preaching minister or pastor is that of *teacher*, dispensing information to the

¹⁷ Dan Mitchell, “The Purpose,” The Bridge, <http://www.thebridgejoplin.com/bridge/aboutus/index.html> (accessed July 25, 2008).

¹⁸ Wright, *Rethink*, 53.

flock. Churches thus became cognitive groups ascribing to a set of teachings and meeting for a few hours each week in a palace of bricks and mortar to receive additional teaching.¹⁹

Youth ministry programs also use colonial techniques that employ duplication, replication, modeling, and parroting. As youth ministry evolved and enlarged, smaller churches looked toward larger churches and para-church organizations for ideas, models, strategies, and curricula. Tony Jones writes in *Postmodern Youth Ministry*,

In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s youth pastors looked to our denominations for guidance: how do we make our kids better Methodists/Catholics/Baptists? In the 1980s and '90s, youth ministry became professionalized, and it seemed that every church was out to hire a youth pastor, at least part-time. Consequently, specialty organizations that catered to youth ministers appeared, such as Youth Specialties and Group. In the late 1990s most of us were looking to a couple mega churches for the recipe: it worked for them, it should work for us.

The problem is, what works in a suburb of Chicago or Los Angeles usually doesn't work here (wherever here is)—and neither do most of us have the resources, in finances or personnel, that mega churches have. Further, in a cultural landscape as diverse as ours, there will be no single youth ministry plan of action that will work across the board.²⁰

This section provides a basic history of youth ministry in the United States. These programs have success stories, but the success appears to be the exception rather than the norm. The history provides a base to examine the effectiveness of youth ministry, and the results are not good. Students are leaving churches in droves after high school, or often before.

¹⁹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Imagining Christ's Church in the City," Missiology.org, <http://www.missiology.org/mmr/mmr33.htm> (accessed July 22, 2008).

²⁰ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2001), 72.

An Emerging Theology of Youth Ministry

The Bible records that God was active in the lives of many young people, and He did not wait for them to mature through adolescence to use them for His kingdom when they became adults. He knew the potential He created in them and their willingness to trust heroically in Him above all else. An example is the story of Joshua and Caleb in Numbers 13 and 14 who were among the spies sent into the Promised Land. When the spies returned, the adult men of the group were afraid and did not trust in God. They claimed that the Israelites should not attempt to take the Promised Land because they would lose, and the entire community of Israel mourned this news. Joshua and Caleb, however, spoke up:

Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." (Num. 14:6-9)

God was with Joshua and Caleb, He had given them great faith, and He was using them for His glory.

Consider Josiah who became King at the age of 8 (2 Kings 22:24), or Esther who God raised up as queen (Esther 2:17). God did not seem frightened by their youth or think they should wait until they became adults to be useful for His plans, His people, and His glory. Jeremiah who was called by God to be a prophet, even though Jeremiah thought he was too young:

The word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” “Ah, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 1:4-8)

God used young people in the New Testament. For example, Mary was young when God gave her the ultimate privilege and responsibility to bear His son. Timothy was mentored by Paul as a leader in the church, and Paul writes to Timothy: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12).

Throughout Scripture God engages young people for His kingdom and glory, and the faith demonstrated by the young often was a witness and example for the old. God is the God of adults, youth, the old, and the God of families, and the Scriptures emphasize the importance of passing the faith to the next generation (Prov. 3:1, Eph. 6:1-4). Parents and families are the primary teachers of the faith, not youth ministers or congregations, as George Barna writes in *Revolutionary Parenting*:

The responsibility for raising spiritual champions, according to the Bible, belongs to the parents. The spiritual nurture of children is supposed to take place in the home. Organizations and people from outside the home might support those efforts, but the responsibility is squarely laid at the feet of the family. This is not a job for specialists. It is a job for parents.²¹

²¹ George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really Works* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna Books, 2007), 11.

The parent's responsibility is emphasized in a passage known as the *Shema*.

Shema is the Hebrew word for "hear" which is the first word of the *Shema* passage:²²

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

This passage was recited by the Israelites twice a day as a lasting ordinance,²³ and Jesus used the *Shema* to answer the Pharisees question about the greatest commandment. The Pharisees asked, "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matt. 22:36-38).

The command to love God above all things is important, and it is also important to teach children the command, teach them about God, and pass on the faith to the next generation. Reciting the *Shema* passage several times each day reminded the Israelites how important instruction about God was for their children. It wove its way into the fabric of their lives, and they talked about God and spiritual things in normal daily activities.²⁴ This command is still applicable, and parents are to teach their children love for God above all things. They should speak about God and spiritual things constantly

²² Horace D. Hummel. *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1979), 93.

²³ *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, s.v. "*Shema*." <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=599&letter=S&search=shema> (accessed January 12, 2009).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

and turn ordinary events into teaching moments. In so doing, parents will pass the faith to the next generation.

This concept of parents teaching their children about God appears constantly in

Scripture:

O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. (Psa. 78:1-7)

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. (Prov. 1:8-9)

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it. (Prov. 22:6)

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2:11-12)

In *Rethink: Decide for Yourself, Is Student Ministry Working?* Wright argues that God's plan for spiritual education was directed at families. The church's role, and therefore the role of the youth minister and youth ministry, is to support families' primary job. He asserts, "Student ministry from a biblical framework views parents as

indispensible ministry partners.”²⁵ And, “The Bible is unmistakably clear that it is the parents’ job to disciple their children.”²⁶

This partnership between family and church, parents and youth ministry is fundamental to the long term success of youth ministry in the Christian Church. Long-term success means that young people commit their lives to Jesus, grow in the faith, and make a life-long commitment to discipleship. Wright writes, “We must begin to champion the God-given role of parents and revalue our student ministry so that student pastors, volunteers, and parents see each other as essential partners in ministry.”²⁷ Wright also asserts, “Teens need family and church working hand-in-hand surrounding them with truth and godly models to follow.”²⁸

In *Revolutionary Parenting* Barna agrees with Wright:

Unlike parents who embrace the “dump and run” strategy of spiritual nurturing—dump the kids at church, run off until the allotted time had expired, then wait until next week to repeat the process to provide their offspring with their dose of spiritual experiences—revolutionary parents see their church as an invaluable partner in a long-term effort to raise a mature follower of Christ.²⁹

Youth ministry must partner with parents, view parents as the primary teachers of faith, and view youth ministers as a resource in ministry because this is God’s plan. It is the

²⁵ Wright, *Rethink*, 51.

²⁶ Ibid., 146.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid., 75.

²⁹ Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*, 106.

most effective way to pass on the faith. In *The Prayer of Jabez* Bruce Wilkinson writes, “Your home is the single most powerful arena on earth to change a life for God.”³⁰

Parents’ vital influence is reported by many researchers. This may be a surprise to researchers and parents, but it should not surprise Christians who know the Creator established this design. Wright reports,

An extensive study of 272,400 teenagers conducted by USA Today Weekend Magazine found that 70 percent of teens identified their parents as the most important influence in their lives. 21 percent said that about their friends (peers), and only 8 percent named the media (TV shows). This study obviously contradicts cultural misconceptions that peers and media are the primary driving force for teens. Today’s research supports what the Bible has said for thousands of years: parents have the most important place in their child’s development.³¹

These studies are not limited to those who advocate parents as the primary religious teachers. For example, the Anheuser-Busch and Coors beer companies support web pages designed to help parents deal with under-age drinking based on the conviction that parents have an incredible influence on their children. The authors of www.familytalkonline.com report,

Studies have shown that parents are the primary influence on their children’s choices and decisions . . . and that is why we’re proud to offer help to parents. Recognizing that parents have the greatest influence on their children’s decisions, the Family Talk program helps . . . by encouraging open, honest communication between parents and children.³²

³⁰ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 32.

³¹ Steve Wright, “Parenting Wisdom From Surprising Sources,” InQuest Ministries, <http://www.inquest.org/ss/ta/Parenting%20Wisdom%20From%20Surprising%20Sources.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2008).

³² Family Talk Online, “About Us,” Anheuser-Busch, <http://www.familytalkonline.com/docs/aboutus.htm> (accessed July 14, 2008).

The Most Valuable Parents Web site states, “Nearly three out of four parents believe their children’s friends and classmates have the most influence. Yet contrary to what parents think, kids say mom and dad have the biggest impact on the choices they make.”³³ Josh McDowell makes the same observation in *The Last Christian Generation*:

Parents . . . carry more weight—for good or bad—than they give themselves credit for. How a child thinks and acts is still molded by his or her home life, which means the crumbling foundations of the faith among this generation is as much a parental problem as a church problem, if not more so. If we’re going to reclaim the next generation, then the home and the church must join forces together like never before.³⁴

These reports support the engagement of parents as the primary teachers of the faith and re-educating the congregation to view student ministry as a congregation-parent-staff partnership. This means youth ministry must partner with parents who together teach, guide, support, equip, and pray for the children. If youth ministers want teenagers to have a life long relationships with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then youth ministers must involve parents and families.

The lasting impact of families that pass on the faith to younger generations is documented. The data demonstrate that students who grew up in a youth subculture and connected to church only through youth groups leave the church, religion, and faith after high school. Those students, however, who as children had spiritual conversations with their parents, discussed their faith at home, and viewed their parents as the primary teachers of their religion and faith, are more likely to keep the faith after high school.

³³ Most Valuable Parents, “Welcome to MVParents.com,” Search Institute, <http://www.mvparents.com/> (accessed July 14, 2008).

³⁴ Josh McDowell and David H. Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL: Green Key, 2006), 59.

Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger wrote *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith & Others Abandon Religion*. The authors identified key influences in young persons' lives that kept them involved in their faith, or caused them to leave it behind after high school. They surveyed 2,000 college freshman and found a group they called the "Amazing Apostates." These students were raised in Christian homes and attended church and youth group on a regular basis, but when they left home after high school, they left their faith behind. Altemeyer and Hunsberger concluded that parents and family life played the largest role in young people's decision to keep the faith or turn from it:

All of the different approaches to studying parental influences in the religious socialization process converge on a single conclusion: Parents play an extremely important role in the developing religious attitudes and practices of their offspring. In fact, few researchers would quarrel with the conclusion that parents are the most important influence in this regard.³⁵

The conclusions are clear: parents influence their children, especially about faith and religion. The authors write, "We acquire our religion from our parents almost as certainly as we inherit the color of our eyes."³⁶ And "Parents of those who 'kept the faith' emphasized religion twice as much as the parents of those who became apostates."³⁷

As youth ministers enter the twenty-first century, they must recapture the God-ordained institution of parents teaching the faith. This is more challenging in contemporary society because the nuclear family of mom, dad, and kids is disappearing.

³⁵ Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith and Others Abandon Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1997), 226.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

New definitions of family can recapture this old idea, and youth ministry must connect with families, however they are defined. Youth ministry should avoid the attractional, propositional, and colonial models in favor of a missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational model.

The mission of God is clear in the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). Christians are called to share the gift of faith, love of the Father, forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross, and the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. The Church’s mission is to reach out to the world and bring the love of Christ to those who know not Jesus (Matt. 28:16-20).

The author of this paper believes the Church has become inwardly focused in modern times. The church has replaced the mission given by Jesus with one that looks after the saved and is not concerned with the lost. Youth ministry has often focused on youth members of the church and has entertained and occupied them so they stay in the church. Youth ministry in the emerging culture can recapture Jesus’ mission and reach out into the world, make disciples, baptize, teach, love, and care for those who do not know Jesus.

Youth ministry can recapture Jesus’ mission and view ministry, individuals, and the church as missional agents for Jesus. Relational youth ministry model practitioners view communities as mission fields. This requires a thorough understanding of the cultural landscape, language, the issues teenagers face, and responses that present the

love of Jesus when, where, and what they need. Without careful thought about how programs and strategies connect with the mission of Jesus, the Church runs the danger of missing community needs. Wright suggests, “Our student ministry events don’t have to be themed around the latest trend to reach students. While we must value creativity and relevance to teens, we must put the greater value on being sure that the Bible is faithfully taught in our ministries.”³⁸

Faith, Bible teaching, and sharing the love of Jesus transform lives (Rom. 12:1-2). Those who encounter Jesus, know his love, understand his mission, and commit their lives to him experience radical transformations. George Barna describes this life transformation: “Simply getting people to go to church regularly is not the key to becoming a mature Christian. Spiritual transformation requires a more extensive investment in one’s ability to interpret all life situations in spiritual terms.”³⁹ In light of Barna’s words: Do the church’s teenagers interpret all life situations in spiritual terms? Do the students encounter the living God, know His Son, and follow His Spirit? Are adult congregants content with teenagers who attend church, or do they desire life transformation?

This author believes an effective youth ministry is missional, relational, incarnational, intergenerational. While it is important that teenagers develop healthy relationships with fellow Christians, an isolated Christian subculture provides a safe place

³⁸ Wright, *Rethink*, 65.

³⁹ George Barna, “The Barna Update,” The Barna Group, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=153> (accessed July 22, 2008).

for teenagers to develop friendships with other Christian teens. This can be a healthy by-product of a relational youth ministry, but the focus must be bigger, broader, and deeper. The nature of the Trinity reveals that God is a relational God. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is three in the one true God. The Father, Son, and Spirit work together, are inseparable, and demonstrate the nature of being in relationship.

God seeks relationships with people as disclosed in the Garden of Eden story (Gen. 3:8-10). God's desire for relationships is also demonstrated when He sent His Son to die on humanity's behalf, so that their sins are forgiven and they can live with Him. John 3:16 speaks clearly of God's love and what He was willing to do in order to have a relationship with individuals: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Relational and missional youth ministry connects teenagers with God and teaches them to live in relationship with Him. Relational youth ministry also strives to build relationships with teenagers, parents, and other church and community adults. This breaks up the youth sub-culture and connects students to the life of the adult congregation through relationships, mentoring, and instruction.

According to Kenda Creasy Dean, the goal of youth ministry is an active faith: "The object of youth ministry [is] to help young people grow faith mature enough that they can use that faith."⁴⁰ This is the heart of incarnational, relational ministry as described by the writer of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his

⁴⁰ Dean, Clark, and Rahn, *Starting Right*, 32.

dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).

The incarnation was the word of God become flesh. Jesus is the word of God in human form, living what God commanded, loving the Father with all his soul, strength, and mind, and loving his neighbors as himself. An incarnational youth ministry teaches teenagers to live as the word of God commands: love God above all things and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:34-40). An incarnational youth ministry provides teenagers opportunity to love communities, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and love the least of these (Matt. 25:31-46). An incarnational youth ministry promotes the desire to live out faith in everyday situations, constantly.

A missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational youth ministry model stresses the importance of the God-ordained family unit and the role of adults in youth ministry. This author believes youth ministry in the emerging culture must also be intergenerational. The average teenager spends 112 hours per week awake and only two or three hours in youth ministry programs, and the programs cannot and should not compete with the time and influence parents have over their children. God planned that parents pass their faith on to their children (Eph. 6:1-4), and youth ministry proponents in the emerging culture understands the Creator’s design and support it. This means youth programs must partner with parents, support their efforts, encourage their own spiritual growth, equip parents to have spiritual conversations with their children, and provide opportunities to pass their faith on to their offspring. George Barna writes,

In situations where children became mature Christians we usually found a symbiotic partnership between their parents and their church. The church encourages parents to prioritize the spiritual development of their children and worked hard to equip them for that challenge. Parents, for their part raised their children in the contest of a faith-based community that provided security, belonging, spiritual, and moral education, and accountability. Neither the parents nor the church could have done it alone.⁴¹

The missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational model involves adults in the community who connect with teenagers in meaningful relationships, and provides mentoring opportunities and service events. Teenagers leave their churches after high school because the churches lack youth groups, youth worship services, and youth Bible studies. Teenagers will not connect to the adult congregation after high school if they have no congregational experience prior to graduation.

Youth ministry in the emerging culture connects students to the life of the congregation and adults who care for, pray, and mentor them. Reid writes, “Limit segregation [by groups] to those times when it’s absolutely necessary. This can include a weekly meeting; however, youth pastors should constantly ask the question, ‘How can I involve youth more in the life of the while church?’ over, ‘How can I take the youth away from the life of the church?’”⁴² An intergenerational approach involves students in the life of the congregation and connects adults to the students’ lives.

While specific ministry to teenagers is relatively new, the Bible provides the foundation for teenagers’ faith development through youth ministries. This chapter provides a history of youth ministry and a theology that underlies the emergent model of

⁴¹ Barna, “The Barna Update.”

⁴² Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 176.

youth ministry. The next chapter describes the role and potential of a missional youth ministry. The following chapters describe the role of a missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational youth ministry in the twenty-first century. This is in support of this paper's thesis that a missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational strategy can connect youth ministries with teenagers. The strategies meet the needs and fit the mindset of emerging culture teenagers inside and outside the church.

CHAPTER 3

MISSIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

—John 20:19-23

Youth ministry in the emerging culture must be missional, so that the God of the ages becomes real and relevant for the teenagers of this age. The concept of a missional ministry is old, but it has new energy and passion in the emerging church. This section provides a scriptural understanding of missional ministry and explores cultural adaptations and youth ministry applications.

Missional is the word missionary in its adjectival form. It identifies the mission of God seen through Jesus and His ministry, which was given to the disciples and early Church. God's mission is redemptive, and even amidst Adam and Eve's first sin, God pointed to His plan of redemption (Gen. 3:14-15). The Old Testament narrative prefigures the way to Jesus and the Scripture presents God's salvation plan. Jesus' mission was to connect lost sinners to the love of the Father, and he ushered in the kingdom of God and invited others to join with him. Jesus says, "As you sent me into the

world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18), and “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’” (John 20:21).

Jesus was sent and demonstrated the Father’s love through his life and actions (John 5:17). He healed the sick, fed the hungry, loved the unlovable, forgave the unforgivable, and shared the love of the Father and the grace of God offered through his death on the cross. Luke describes Jesus’ purpose, “But he said, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent’” (Luke 4:43). He was sent and he sent his followers: “And he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2).

Jesus gave his final marching orders after spending three years leading people into the Kingdom of God and preparing his followers to continue in His mission. He told his disciples, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, and to the ends of the earth” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus sent his followers, the Church, into the world, but he did not send them alone or without power. He promised to be with them always: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The key to God’s mission of redemption is the cross of Jesus Christ, and participation in God’s mission and connection to the Kingdom of God brings the cross of Jesus to the world: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). The Son of

God who willingly giving up his life on the cross is God's redemptive work, the realization of his mission. That mission continues as the power and work of the cross live on: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we are healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

A connection to the mission of God brings the love of Christ, the redemption of His death on the cross, and reconciliation with the Father to all people, everywhere:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

Christians are called to go boldly into the world with this mission as ambassadors for Jesus, armed with the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God through Jesus' death on the cross. The early church lived this mission, and the author of Acts describes a missional lifestyle:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

God's mission is every Christian's mission as demonstrated by Jesus, and through his example of love Christians can connect with the kingdom of God. Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another, as I have loved you, so you must love one

another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). The writer of 1 John defines this love and how it manifests itself in believers’ lives: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:16-17).

God’s desire is for all people to know His love. Jesus’ death on the cross was a ransom for many: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). The world is diverse, and connecting to the mission of God and bringing His love and Grace to every culture require careful study of people, language, history, community, and culture. Paul’s work at the Areopagus confirms this reality (Acts 17:22-34). The message does not change and the cross is still the focal point, but the delivery, style, and timing change and match the people with whom Paul shared the Gospel. Paul tailored his message to the Athenians at the Areopagus, and contemporary Christians can tailor the message to diverse, modern cultures.

The biblical framework for missional ministry is: connect with God in His kingdom work, share the grace of God through Jesus’ death on the cross, love as Jesus loved, reach out to the entire world, and connect with all cultures. This missional ministry can function in the emerging culture. In the book *The Present Future*, McNeal describes and emphasizes the need for cultural exegesis: “Missiologists do cultural exegesis. Missionaries understand that being culturally relevant is critical to an evangelism

strategy. . . . The point is not to adopt the culture and lose the message; the point is to understand the culture so we can build bridges to it for the sake of gaining a hearing for the gospel of Jesus.”¹

Emerging church leaders believe the modern church cannot speak the language of the culture outside its doors. To be effective, the emerging church must break the missional code, understand the culture, and communicate Jesus’ message continually. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger write in *Emerging Churches*, “To pastor missionally, church leaders must understand the cultural changes that have occurred *outside* its doors.”² They add, “Ultimately, Christians who want to serve within Western culture must be trained as missionaries. They must understand both the incarnational demands of the gospel and the surrounding context.”³

Missional practitioners who want to connect with those outside Christian circles and present the Gospel to them in meaningful, life-impacting ways must understand their audiences, what they believe, and the roots of their thoughts. Recently, research and books have appeared about emerging generations and their connection to the Christian Church in the United States. As discussed earlier, two books report the views of young Americans who are outside the Christian Church and faith. Kimball writes: “We are living in an increasingly ‘post-Christian’ culture. America once was more of a ‘Christian nation’ whose influences and values were aligned with a Judeo-Christian values and

¹ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 51.

² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 18.

³ Ibid., 26.

ethics.”⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons conducted their research through the Barna Group and report results similar to Kimball, cited in the first chapter of their paper: “Our research shows that many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders.”⁵

These viewpoints are very important. People outside Christianity may not respond positively to the message that God loves them and Jesus died on the cross for their sins if they do not trust the speaker, believe that God is the one true God, or are not convinced that knowing Jesus and following Him changed others. Missional disciples must understand the views of those with whom they hope to connect, and they must shape their discussions, design their outreach methods, and build bridges that create an environment where the Gospel can be shared. To be missional is to understand the culture, understand the thoughts and attitudes of those outside Christianity, and adjust ministry accordingly.

Emerging churches must break their community’s missional code, understand the culture, and develop ways to share the gospel within that culture. In *Herding Cats*, Rusty George and Jeff Krajewski describe what it means to be missional:

The only subject matter that a Christian should be more familiar with than the pagan culture where he lives is the gospel itself. The timeless and unchanging gospel always falls into an ever-changing culture. Every disciple is called to be a missionary in his or her culture. Every true missionary is called to advance the mission of Christ into a particular group of people. Missionaries must learn the language, music, literature, economy, and pagan religions of a culture to best reach the people. He or she must speak the truth of Christ in a common tongue.

⁴ Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 15.

⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11.

The same is true for all churches and missionaries serious about reaching the post-Christian western world.⁶

Churches must understand the community and culture in which they live to connect with the emerging culture. Christ wants missionaries to reach the hurting world, especially people not connected to Jesus. Missional youth ministry in the emerging culture follows this missional mindset, and missional minded leaders must evaluate and understand teenage culture. Tony Jones writes,

Youth workers are missionaries. We've known this in theory for a long time, but in the postmodern world it must be our primary means of self-definition. Mission work in a post-Christian world takes time, energy, and patience. Youth workers can no longer waltz into a community and think that everyone will come running because there's a concert at church on Friday night. It's going to be a lengthy process that takes cultural study, prayer, and long-term commitment.⁷

Missional youth ministry requires an intentional approach that breaks the cultural code. Time must be spent in the local high schools, places where teens hang out, and youth workers must visit them, understand, and pray for them. In *Raising Up Young Heroes* Efrem Smith writes, "By looking at the areas of spirit, soul and body and taking into consideration things such as setting (urban, suburban, rural) and issues that youth in your ministry are facing, you will have reasoning behind the type of programs and services your youth Ministry provides."⁸

⁶ Rusty George and Jeff Krajewski, *HerdinG Cats: Teaching and Leading in a Postmodern World* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2001), 186.

⁷ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 46.

⁸ Efrem Smith, *Raising Up Young Heroes: Developing a Revolutionary Youth Ministry* (InterVarsity, 2004), 39.

This approach requires that missional youth ministers go where teenagers congregate. Many churches adopted the approach based on the adage from the movie *Field of Dreams*: “If you build it they will come.”⁹ This is the attractional model that uses youth ministry experiences to draw teenagers to the church. As described earlier in this paper, this approach failed. Leonard Sweet writes in *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, “Organized religion has been assuming that because it has a better product—namely, God—that it simply needs to open the doors and customers will line up. That assumption no longer holds.”¹⁰

The attractional plan was to do something that draws teenagers into the church building. This was attempted in several ways; the first was programming strategies. Fun-filled social events started filling youth ministry calendars. The hope was that the crazier the games, the more likely teens would attend, just to see what happens next. Worship services were planned for teenagers that included a worship band made up of young musicians playing loud “edgy” music. Big name speakers were sought to entertain and draw teenagers, and food was served at every event.

The second method of attracting students into churches was through physical space and toys. Youth were no longer relegated to the basement and were now given prime spaces and big rooms filled with high tech sound systems, lighting, and entertainment. Video games, television screens, soda machines, and restaurant like

⁹ *Field of Dreams*, directed by Phil Alden Robinson, Universal Studios, 1989.

¹⁰ Leonard I. Sweet and Edward Hammett, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2007), 5.

seating were included in this method. The idea was to replicate places where teenagers congregate, so that the church would become their new hangout spot. In this author's experience, these methods worked for a time, and youth were attracted to the church. When teenagers come to church, Jesus Christ was shared and many students came to know God.

This mentality, however, was difficult to maintain. The contemporary world caters to teenagers because they control disposable income, and retailers seek after teenagers. The church found itself in competition as another retailer, another place to spend time and money. The reality is that most churches cannot compete with the amount of money retailers spend to attract teenagers to their businesses.

The attractional ministry idea spread and churches competed with other churches. When a church built something or added a program that attracted teenagers, other local churches replicated and enlarged it. Teenagers connected with the church their friends attended, and this promoted church hopping and a shopping mentality. One church would have a corner on the market, only to be upset and outdone by another church with a new program and a flashier building. Since most Christian churches work towards the same goal, they seemly hurt themselves and the teenagers by this constant competition.

Missional-minded youth ministers require a complete overhaul of attractional practices and theory. The history of youth ministry presented in chapter 2 concluded that models based on attraction and other youth approaches fall short. Reid and Barna were quoted in chapter 2 of this paper, and they concluded this approach is no longer valid nor

effective.¹¹ Tony Jones writes, “The days of big programming, dynamic communicators, and huge sound systems is coming to an end.”¹² The reality is that while impressive youth ministries may attract teenagers, they will not remain without relationships, substance, challenges, commitment, and connections.

The missional youth pastor goes out to the world and brings the love of Jesus Christ to the lives of young people in their culture so that Jesus becomes real and relevant for a lifetime. Sweet asserts, “Postmodern evangelism doesn’t say to the world, ‘come to church.’ Rather, it says to the church, ‘go to the world.’”¹³ Rather than attracting students to church, the missional youth minister goes to them, and a missional mindset brings God’s message out of the youth room and into the community.

Another issue of the attractional youth ministry model prevalent in mainline Christian churches is teenagers’ connection to the church after high school. If the church depends on attractions, great speakers, a rocking youth band, great mission trips, camps, and events that connect teenagers to the church, what happens when they outgrow the youth group activities? Reid writes,

It is a sad fact of life that often, the stronger the youth program in the church, and the more deeply the young people of the church identify with it, the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they grow too old for the youth program. Why? Because the youth program has

¹¹ Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 38; Barna, *Real Teens*, 132.

¹² Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003), 14.

¹³ Leonard I. Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 53.

become a substitute for participation in the church. . . . When the kids outgrow the youth program, they also outgrow what they have come to know of the church.¹⁴

The new cultural paradigm of the postmodern mind requires a missional response.

Youth ministry can learn, adapt, plan, and grow by understanding the emerging culture and designing ministry that connects teenagers, builds relationships, challenges growth, serves the world, and builds the kingdom. Jones suggests,

Postmodernity may be the greatest thing that's ever happened to youth Ministry. The youth culture landscape is becoming much as it was for Paul in Acts 17, and the potential for evangelism is incredible. We have the holy privilege of reintroducing Jesus and the Christian faith to ears and hearts that have never heard of the real thing before. But we have to resist clinging to modern methodologies, despite their past—and even current—successes. We must completely rethink what it means to engage in dialogue with teens. Ours are extremely exciting, very promising times.¹⁵

A missional youth ministry builds on the past but creates a new kind of youth ministry that maximizes relationships, connects students to the church body, shares the love and life-changing grace of Jesus Christ, and puts service into practice. Mike Yaconelli says, “This generation is longing for relationship, mystery, experience, passion, wonder, creativity, and spontaneity. In other words, they want to go past where the ‘sidewalk ends.’ They long for the place just beyond words, the shore of mystery. In other words, they’re looking for Jesus.”¹⁶

Efrem Smith speaks of the future of youth ministry built upon past successes and traditions: “I believe that today, more than ever, youth Ministry must go beyond just

¹⁴ Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 169.

¹⁵ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

Sunday school, confirmation and small groups. None of these things are bad, nor should they be thrown out. But, I believe that with the challenges they face today, youth need out-of-the-box ministry models to teach them to walk daily with Jesus.”¹⁷ Movement into the future is critical because, Sweet says, “If you don’t change, you die. It’s that simple. It’s that scary.”¹⁸

The modern youth ministry program was centered around entertainment. The postmodern teenager does not need to be entertained by the church, and most churches cannot compete with the secular world’s entertainment. A missional youth ministry emphasizes that Christians are to form a body of believers centered on the worship of the almighty God, a group that shares, teaches, loves, admonishes, encourages, and serves the local community. Jones emphasizes the point: “The Church needs to be what it is: a sacred community of persons who follow a mysterious and demanding Lord.”¹⁹

The church must see the community as a missionary views a new mission field. It must embrace teenage culture and translate the love of Christ into their language. Kinnaman and Lyons cite Jesus’ great example: “He [Jesus] engaged his culture and its people with respect and love. He was *in* but not *of* the world.”²⁰

The church can understand how popular culture influences teenagers and use those influences for the Kingdom of God’s benefit. Kinnaman and Lyons write, “Movies,

¹⁷ Smith, *Raising Up Young Heroes*, 11.

¹⁸ Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*, 73.

¹⁹ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 90.

²⁰ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 40.

television, books, magazines, the Internet, and music are incredibly significant in shaping the world views and lifestyles of today's America. And Christians are expressing a growing awareness in response to these avenues of influence."²¹

Missional youth ministry must learn to connect with emerging generations. In *Postmodern Pilgrims* and *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, Sweet describes the need for EPIC ministry. EPIC stands for Experiential, Participatory, Image-rich, and Connective.²² He suggests youth ministry should create opportunities for youth to experience Christ, participate in the ministry, use their senses and imaginations through images, and connect with Jesus, each other, their parents, other adults, and the congregation. Kenda Creasy Dean summarizes the concept in *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*: "The quintessential standard for excellence among adolescents is 'Did it *move* me?'"²³ Missional leaders in youth ministry connect with the local culture, attempt to understand teenagers, and plan ministry that is EPIC and emotionally moving.

Missional youth ministry also connects with parents and the ever changing family structure. Youth ministers must develop ministry that gives parents the primary responsibility of passing along the faith based on the various family structures found in the community and church. As the church reaches into communities and understands the people in churches, it will discover family structures of every shape imaginable.

²¹ Ibid., 168.

²² Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*; Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*.

²³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 99.

Missional ministries in these settings must move beyond simple family ministry models towards deep relationships, mentorships, and teaching opportunities. Single parents and parents where one is Christian and one is not may pass on the Christian faith effectively. Children whose parents are not Christian and children whose parents use the church as a baby-sitting service, can be taught the faith.

Multiple models of family exist in America. Missional youth ministry must understand family dynamics, help parents with their biggest responsibility, and step in when parents do not function effectively. Surrogate parents can assist teenagers whose parents are not active in in the church or their child's life. Missional youth ministry in the emerging culture takes into account the changing needs of parents and families, assists them with their greatest vocational calling, and teaches the children that the Lord is one. The next chapter describes the role and function of relational youth ministry in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 4

RELATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

—John 13:34-35

The author of this paper believes youth ministry in the emerging culture must be relational, so that teenagers build connections with peers, parents, and adults that will anchor them to the firm foundation of Jesus Christ during the storms and stresses of life. Relationships have been a part of God's design since the beginning when God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). The relationships include different levels of contact, influence, value, and cost because humans are relational beings.

God is a relational God expressed in the nature and trinitarian doctrine of one God with three distinct persons who work in perfect harmony and balance (Matt. 28:19). The trinity is a holy mystery, divine enigma, outside human understanding or comprehension, accepted through faith, and expressed in the Nicene Creed.¹ And although Christians do not understand the Trinity, God reveals the relationship throughout Scripture.

¹ Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 25-26.

God is eternal and without beginning or end, and God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are omnipresent. John records, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). In trinitarian relationship, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:26) and planned for the redemption of His creation through the blood of His Son on the cross (Gen. 3:14-15, Col. 2:13-15). In relationship God calls, redeems, and sanctifies the Church on earth. Paul writes,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

The relationship of God in the Trinity is expressed in the story of Jesus' baptism: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3:16-17). In this Scripture, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in relationship.

As a God of relationships God calls humans into relationship with Himself, and through the Son they are brought to the Father: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). God's desire is for humanity

to be in relationship with Him, and this required the death of His Son to take away the sins of the world. John details God's love and desire for relationship: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Humans are created as relational beings and designed for relationship with others. In *Personal Knowledge* Michael Polanyi writes, "The fostering of good fellowship within small groups of people living together . . . is a direct contribution to the fulfillment of man's purpose and duty as a social being."² Jesus is totally God and man, and he demonstrates living in relationships with other people. Jesus was influential with people he contacted, and through his life and love he pointed the way to the Father (John 6:46-51). This author believes Jesus was the most influential man to walk the earth, and he stood alongside people in their joy and pain.

The story of Jesus and Lazarus describes Jesus' relational qualities and behavior (John 11). The relationship that Jesus had with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha was about sharing life, connecting with joy and pain, and standing where the other stands. Jesus risked injury and danger to visit Mary and Martha during their bereavement. His disciples warned Jesus not to travel back to Judea because of the danger, but Jesus dediced to go anyway. Once in town with the grieving sisters, Jesus felt and shared their pain, stayed with them in their sorrow, and offered his relationship. Two words demonstrate his emotion and empathy: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). He knew he would raise Lazarus from

² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 210.

the grave, and he told his disciples, Mary, and Martha that he would perform the miracle. His tears were not from grief over Lazarus; his tears were with and for Mary and Martha. Jesus stood with them in their pain and he wept empathetically because Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33). His connection to Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and those who mourned was clear to other witnesses who said, “See how He loved him” (John 11:36).

In his book *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* Andrew Root writes, “Relationships aren’t about making things better, they’re about being together in each other’s most difficult and painful moments; that’s love.”³ Root calls this aspect of relationships “place-sharing”:

Place-sharing takes shape when we place ourselves fully in the reality of the other, refusing to turn away even from its darkest horror. Just as Jesus incarnate, crucified and resurrected was fully our place-sharer, so we too, as Jesus’ disciples, must ourselves become place-sharers, suffering with and for young people. I believe that when we rethink and reimagine relational youth ministry as place-sharing, we will be able to see human-to-human relationships as the location of God’s presence in the world, and therefore honor the broken and yet beautiful humanity of adolescents (and ourselves!)⁴

Jesus demonstrates what it means to live in relationship with God through example and parable. As a young man Jesus knew the importance of spending time in his Father’s house, and when his parents searched for him, he stated, “Why were you searching for me?—Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). Jesus’ relationship with God led him to be baptized even though John the Baptist

³ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 79.

⁴ Ibid., 83.

discouraged him: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (Matt. 3:13-15). When he was ready to begin his public ministry, Jesus spent time fasting, praying, and in relationship with God. He was tempted by Satan in this experience, but he turned to God's word for inspiration, comfort, and guidance (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus spent relational quiet time alone with God throughout his ministry: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35).

Jesus also taught through parables about God's desire to be in relationship with humanity, and the many parables about the kingdom of heaven demonstrate God's desire to draw humans to Himself. For example, the parable of the hidden treasure shows the importance and value of a relationship with God: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought the field" (Matt. 13:44). This parable teaches that the kingdom of heaven is of such great value that individuals should go to great lengths and expense to attain it.

God desires a relationship with individuals, and He makes the first move. Paul writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Humanity cannot earn a relationship with God because sin separated them from God: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom.

3:23-24). The writer of Hebrews speaks of the new covenant Jesus established in contrast to the old covenant and the animal sacrifices offered for sin. In the new covenant, Jesus acted as the high priest and offered himself as a perfect sacrifice, once and for all, so the sins of the world could be forgiven and humans could come to God directly (Heb. 9:11-15). When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple split in two (Matt. 27:51). This is symbolic of the fact that through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, believers come to the Father directly, are forgiven, made clean, and are ready for relationship (Heb. 9:11-15, 10:19-22).

The Bible writers emphasize the value of mentoring relationships in, for example, the connections between Paul and Timothy. Paul probably brought Timothy to faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ while Paul was in Lystra (Acts 16:1). Paul speaks very fondly of Timothy and requests that Timothy visit as soon as possible before Paul dies (2 Tim. 4:9). At the time of Paul's second visit to Lystra, he begins the mentoring relationship with Timothy and prepares him for ministry. Timothy was with Paul throughout much of his ministry in good times and bad, including some time in prison (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1, Philem. 1). The two letters from Paul to Timothy are from mentor to mentee, and Paul reminds Timothy of lessons learned, supports him with the gospel of Christ, and encourages him (1 Tim. 3:10-11). These are relational lessons youth ministers can learn from Paul and Timothy (2 Tim. 4:1-5). Relational youth leaders connect with young people and connect youth with adult mentors who teach, support, and encourage them in the faith.

Relationships have always been a part of Christian ministry. It is difficult to separate ministry from relationships because, by definition, all human interactions are relational. The goal is the effective use of relationships as a part of ministry, but how does a youth minister create a relational ministry?

Youth ministry has used relational connections and programs since the beginning. For example, in 1938 Jim Rayburn started a club for high school students that later became Young Life in 1941.⁵ Young Life leaders believed adults had to “earn the right” to be heard, which meant spending time with teenagers in their world and attempting to understand and appreciate them before the “right” to share the gospel was “earned.” Young Life emulated Jesus who put relationships before preaching.⁶ He shared his life with the twelve disciples for three years before they realized fully the message he brought them. His sermons were based on life and shared experiences, rather than on proclamations from a place of superiority.

The concept developed by Young Life has important implications for twenty-first century, relational ministries. For example, a colleague of this paper’s author led a group of eighth graders on a summer trip that included cliff jumping. Several of the youth watched him closely to see how he would react to the various challenges. Would the youth leader watch them, try to show them up, or lead them and work alongside them? He took them to the edge of the forty-five foot cliff, made certain it was safe, and jumped

⁵ Young Life, “History,” Young Life, <http://www.younglife.org/AboutYoungLife/History.htm> (accessed January 13, 2009).

⁶ Ibid.

first. He did not act with bravado, but encouraged the rest to jump after him. He praised those that jumped and taught invaluable lessons about compassion and understanding towards those who did not jump. It was the defining moment of the trip and ministry because he gained their respect and trust and used the experience in devotional messages about taking a leap of faith, courage in the face of ridicule, and the body of Christ working together toward a common goal. This story exemplifies what it means to earn the right to share the Gospel.

Relational ministry focuses and capitalizes on influence, and teenagers are very susceptible to good and bad influence. This reality is evident throughout society. Businesses spend billions of dollars targeting teenagers and teenage culture to influence teenagers' buying behaviors. This paper demonstrates the influence parents have on teenagers who often emulate their parents' beliefs and behaviors. Peer influence amongst teenagers is both positive and negative. Adolescence is a life stage marked by a growing awareness of self, connection to the culture and world, and a general lack of responsibility. By understanding the adolescent cultural phenomenon, churches can influence teenagers, teach them about Jesus, connect them with nurturing adults, and prepare them for a life of service within the church. Relational youth ministry is a tool for the engagement of young people in the church's life and future.

In *Postmodern Youth Ministry* Jones writes, "In this postmodern time, youth workers must recover the communal spirit of the Christian faith through worship, a reliance upon the Trinity, and other community-focused and community-based

activities.”⁷ The relational youth minister can develop a community built on teenagers’ relationships with God, parents, students, youth leaders and counselors, and adult congregants. Teenagers in the emerging culture connect effectively, but they often lack face to face connections. Teenagers text message, e-mail, IM, call, twitter, or Skype that are web technology verb forms for up-to-the-minute blogging (<http://twitter.com/>) or phone calls, and video conferencing (www.skype.com). These instant and almost constant connections often lack face-to-face relationships. Relational youth ministry creates opportunities for relationships that involve face-to-face human interaction.

In *Soul Searching*, Smith reported that teenagers remain generally connected to local Christian congregations. Research reported by Kinnaman and Lyons, and Kimball, and described in chapter 1 of this paper, reveals that individuals 18-35 years old leave the church and their faith behind. This puts incredible importance on youth ministry in the emerging culture because teenagers are connected in one way or another to the local congregation. This means youth ministers have an opportunity to build relationships and connections that will last a lifetime so that when teenagers leave high school and their parents’ homes, they have foundations that keep them connected to Jesus, their faith, and the local congregation.

Kinnaman and Lyons write, “For both Mosaics and Busters, relationships are the driving force. Being loyal to friends is one of their highest values. They have a strong need to belong, usually to a tribe of other loyal people who know them well and

⁷ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 80.

appreciate them.”⁸ Relationships help students stay connected to the church after high school, and Kinnaman and Lyons provide suggestions for connecting with teenagers outside the church: “God has wired human beings so that spiritual influence occurs most commonly through relationships.”⁹ The relational power is true for teenagers and young adults, including those raised inside or outside the church.

Kimball writes, “In today’s culture, people don’t come to have trust and understanding until they feel they belong. Then the Spirit moves in them, bringing them to a point of belief.”¹⁰ These ideas and practices underlie relational youth ministry. Root argues against relationships of influence in youth ministry and, instead, emphasizes a relational ministry of place-sharing. As quoted earlier, “Place-sharing takes shape when we place ourselves fully in the reality of the other, refusing to turn away even from its darkest horror.”¹¹

Root advises, “Relational ministries should avoid the temptation to use relationships to influence adolescents and instead see the mandate of the incarnation as the call to shared solidarity in common humanity.”¹² Root recounts the history of youth ministry in the United States and demonstrates how youth ministry uses relationships for influential purposes:

⁸ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰ Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*, 215.

¹¹ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 92.

Relational ministry has had more to do with cultural conflict and fear of adolescent moral decay than sharing in the deep suffering and joy of the adolescent's humanity as the place of God's action in the world. This deficiency has caused youth ministry to see relationships in a goal-oriented rather than a companionship-oriented fashion that is more faithful to a theology of the incarnation.¹³

For Root, the goal is the use of relationships to influence people. Relational ministry has focused on Christian people who share their lives with others, demonstrate the transformation they experienced through Christ, live the Jesus called life, and walk with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Root observes, "Through personal connections and positive example, evangelicals believe they can influence others toward the benefits and joys of being in a personal relationship with Jesus."¹⁴

Root contends that relational ministry can move beyond influence and focus on place-sharing relationships. He believes the relational ministry of influence is ineffective because teenagers reject adult attempts to manipulate them through disingenuous relationships and adults' unwillingness to stand with them in their trials. Root writes, "It may be that the reason they don't trust our offers of friendship is that they intuitively know that we are not willing to see, hear and accompany them in their deepest suffering. We have offered them trips to Disneyland, silly games and 'cool' youth rooms, not companionship in their darkest nights, their scariest of hells."¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ Ibid., 96.

Root believes, “It is *not* too late to reimagine relational youth ministry apart from personal influence.”¹⁶ He connects the incarnation of Jesus Christ to the need and calling Christians have from God to build relationships: “The incarnation is not about influence but accompaniment. It is not about getting us right but bearing what is wrong with us, so that we might find that we are only right in the embrace of a God who loves so much to be with us!”¹⁷ Root lists four results when Christians act as place-sharers:

What happens when person meets person in relationships of place-sharing? When we act as place-sharers (1) we experience the concrete presence of Jesus Christ as transcendent in our relational bonds with the other, (2) we discover that the other person is transcendent to our own being and as such is beyond or more than cultural definition, (3) our actions for and with the other, who is transcendent, are governed by Jesus’ own actions of place-sharing, and (4) we experience the transformation of our very person in encountering the transcendent other.¹⁸

Root’s relational ministry ideas connect with Scripture and portray Christ concretely:

Relational ministry is about relationships, not because they involve adolescents in programs, not because in a hostile culture relationships mediate the gospel message, not because relationships can make adolescents into super-committed lifelong believers. They may help in some if not all of these areas, but *the theological commitment to relationships in relational ministry should be solely because in our connection one to another as I and you Christ is concretely present.*¹⁹ (Author’s emphasis)

Root’s theology for relational ministry can change how youth ministers understand and incorporate ministry strategies: “By seeing relational ministry as participation in the person of Christ in the world, relationships in youth ministry are freed

¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁸ Ibid., 172.

¹⁹ Ibid., 117.

from being only tools to strengthen subcultural identity and are seen instead as the place where we experience God's presence in the world."²⁰ Relational youth ministers can recognize teenagers' realities: who they are, where they are in life, and the power of relationships in their lives. Relational youth ministry can combine incarnational destination of place-sharing and the power of influence.

Teenagers' identities are being formed, and this formation takes place among outside influences. In this author's opinion teenagers are some of the most influential people on earth. Recognizing their malleability means planning relational ministry that uses the positive aspects of influence and the power of place-sharing.

Motivation navigates the fine line between using influence and abusing it. Relational youth ministry in the emerging culture builds relationships and shares Jesus with other people, but this is not a form of evangelism that uses relationships to convert people and involve them as church members. This is relationship building for the sake of the Gospel, and Jesus is shared in community, through living.

While conversion is an ideal result, it is not the reason for the relationship. Loving Jesus with all heart, soul, strength, and mind promotes love of others and a desire to share Jesus. The motivation in relational youth ministry is not numerical growth, but life transformation. This motivation is not an attempt to make a better world for teenagers, but to love them as Jesus loves them. The result is in the hands of the Holy Spirit. George and Krajewski suggest, "Disciple making begins with a relationship. It begins with

²⁰ Ibid., 103.

someone who loves Jesus and loves other people. It begins with a burden in the heart of a believer to share his or her life experience with someone else.”²¹

Root cautions against poor motivations:

Ministry, then is not about “using” relationships to get individuals to accept a “third thing,” whether that be conservative politics, moral behaviors or even the gospel message. Rather, ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives. It is about shared life, confessing Christ not outside the relationship but within it.²²

The use of both the power of influence and place-sharing in relational youth ministry may be a difficult, but worthwhile endeavor. There are some pitfalls, and relational youth ministers must allow teenagers time to connect with the church and youth ministry before they believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and before they commit their lives to him.

Relational youth ministry practitioners view teenagers as God’s beloved creations, and they move beyond condemnation for sin, toward connecting without condoning. This avoids building a ministry for the saved at the expense of the lost. Inclusion in the Kingdom of God comes through the forgiveness Jesus freely gives, and he wants Christians to forgive others. The writer of Matthew emphasizes this expectation: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (Matt. 18:21-22). Some might suggest that if teenagers do not

²¹ George and Krajewski, *Herding Cats*, 112.

²² Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 15.

respond to the law and grace of God, the Christian should move on to another person.

This attitude views teenagers as ministry targets, rather than God's beloved creations.

God's grace is manifested and palpable when youth ministry exudes forgiveness and acceptance. Students who love and accept their peers will be transformed, and then those who struggle with sin and temptation have time, freedom, and grace to see Jesus in others and may turn toward him. This approach reflects Paul's description of Christians who plant the seed, water, fertilize, take care of, and love it, but it is God who "gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:4-6). This is a freeing realization: Christians are not responsible for making faith grow, they create a place for God through acceptance, love, and forgiveness.

Manipulation of relationships is another pitfall to avoid. In this author's experience, teenagers recognize when someone uses a relationship or situation to control or illicit a response, compared with a relationship that is genuine and authentic. Relational youth ministers should understand their motivation and ask: Do they want to control conversations and situations, and direct things toward Jesus? Will they stand with and for teenagers when they struggle with life? Relational motivations focus on place-sharing and recognizing the incredible influential nature of teenagers.

Relational youth ministry connects teenagers with parents and adult congregants. Root asserts, "For youth ministry to be a relational ministry of place-sharing the focus must move away from the group and toward the congregation."²³ Connections between teenagers and congregants help break down the youth ministry subculture, reinforce

²³ Ibid., 208.

parental responsibility for faith education, and assist in relating students to congregational life after high school.

Root provides practical concepts as they connect students to the life of the congregation, specifically through the adult/teen relationships of place-sharing:

The youth pastor is the coordinator (or matchmaker) of adult and adolescent bonds. He or she provides open spaces and organizes activities and programs where organic relationships can develop. This means youth pastors should have a deep knowledge of both the adult and the adolescent population, inviting adults to see, hear and act for the adolescent in their congregation or local community.²⁴

When a relational youth pastor connects the youth population and the adult congregation, they can connect the two groups in place-sharing relationships. Root writes:

A youth pastor then asks the adults to see, listen and act in the same manner for the young people surrounding them. No long training period is needed to mold willing adults into model youth leaders, for there is no such thing. Rather, what is needed is for the adult leader to be an authentic human being with and for the adolescent, opening his or her unique person to the adolescent, inviting the adolescent to share in his or her life.²⁵

In this author's experience, influence happens and is a natural byproduct of all relationships. A person in contact with another has influence, and this occurs in adult/teenage relationships. This chapter emphasizes the importance of relations, and connecting teenagers with mature Christian adults is a potential positive influence toward mature faith and lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. The benefit of place-sharing between adults and teenagers is the presence of Jesus Christ in those relationships through the Spirit. Individuals experience the incarnational love of Christ when they

²⁴ Ibid., 201.

²⁵ Ibid., 202.

stand with people in their pain, suffering, and trials, and support each other. Jesus told his believers to love their neighbors as he first loved them (Matt. 19:19). The next chapter describes the role and function of incarnational youth ministry in the twenty-first century and is in support of this paper's thesis that youth ministries can connect effectively with teenagers through missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational strategies.

CHAPTER 5

INCARNATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:1, 14

Effective youth ministry in the emerging culture needs to be incarnational, which means Christians embody the love of God in the world. This is necessary to assist students in making an abstract faith concrete thus connecting words with actions and thoughts with deeds, so that as teenagers grow towards adulthood their faith is being physically manifested through loving action. The incarnation occurred when God entered a human body and Jesus was born. When God's word became flesh, His love was manifested through healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, loving the poor, and forgiving sins (Matt. 11:2-6). This is the Kingdom of God at work in the world, and Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:1-3).

The Kingdom of God is a complex theology that permeates the Bible, and George Ladd points out:

The Kingdom is a present reality (Matt. 12:28), and yet it is a future blessing (1 Cor. 15:50). It is an inner spiritual redemptive blessing (Rom. 14:17) which can be experienced only by way of the new birth (John 3:3), and yet it will have to do with the government of the nations of the world (Rev. 11:15). The Kingdom is a realm into which men enter now (Matt. 21:31), and yet it is a realm into which they will enter tomorrow (Matt. 8:11). It is at the same time a gift of God which

will be bestowed by God in the future (Luke 12:32) and yet which must be received in the present (Mark 10:15). Obviously no simple explanation can do justice to such a rich but diverse variety of teaching.¹ Ladd examines the theology of the Kingdom of God and concludes: "The Kingdom of God is basically the rule of God. It is God's reign, the divine sovereignty in action. God's reign, however, is manifested in several realms, and the Gospels speak of entering into the Kingdom of God both today and tomorrow."²

Incarnational ministry focuses on the Kingdom of God at work now, a present reality that Jesus ushered in with future potential and promise. Emerging congregations and youth ministries seek to participate in the kingdom of God, and Gibbs and Bolger describe how emerging churches participate incarnationally in their communities:

Jesus proclaimed the good news that his hearers could join him in a new way of life. More than simply offering a message of personal salvation, Jesus invited his followers to participate in God's redemption of the world. Emerging churches have adopted this restored understanding of the gospel, and it has dramatically transformed the way they train both new and not-so-new Christians in the faith.³

McNeal agrees with this concept of participation with God and writes: "That's the church's mission: to join God in his redemptive efforts to save the world."⁴ Emerging churches go outside their walls and church buildings into their communities and make a difference for the sake of Jesus. Kimball writes, "Emerging generations are connecting with the idea of living in tune with Jesus, placing yourself under God's reign and being a participant in the kingdom now."⁵ Emerging churches look for ways to participate

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 18.

² Ibid., 24.

³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 56.

⁴ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 19.

⁵ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 202.

incarnationally in their local communities, and Kimball adds: “We have to present a life-altering, soul-changing message that invites people though Jesus’ death to be participants in the kingdom of God now.”⁶

This is the mission Jesus gave this disciples when he told them to go into all the world, making disciples, teaching, baptizing, and loving (Matt. 28:16-20, John 20:19-23, Acts 1:4-8). In *Jim and Casper Go to Church*, Jim Henderson and Matt Casper write that the church’s mission is to reach out to the world; it is not the world’s mission to seek the church: “Jesus gave us a mission. I don’t remember reading anything in the Bible written to missing people telling them to ‘go into all the church.’ They don’t have a mission to adjust to us; we have to adapt for them. It’s called the incarnation.”⁷ Incarnational youth ministry in the emerging culture takes this mission seriously and participates with God in His redemptive work, loving and serving communities.

Jesus’ miraculous birth was the incarnation of the Word of God. When he began his public ministry, he said the Kingdom of God was at hand and how Christians can and should follow him in the Kingdom’s work. Mark describes the beginning of the new era: “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15). Hugh Halter writes in *The Tangible Kingdom*:

Jesus is saying that there is a new Kingdom now, one that’s totally different from the kingdom you’re accustomed to, and anyone can get in on it. Different things

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jim Henderson and Matt Casper, *Jim and Casper Go to Church: Frank Conversation about Faith, Churches, and Well-Meaning Christians* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna, 2007), 149.

can and should happen now. His message wasn't about just some future blessing of heaven; it was an announcement that his heavenly ways are available in some way here on Earth. Not in fullness, for it will never be heaven here. But you *can* have a slice of heaven here on Earth.⁸

Jesus was the word of God in flesh and action (John 10:37-38), the light of the world (John 8:12), and calls Christians to be light to the world (Matt. 5:16, Luke 11:33). He looked after the poor and afflicted, healed the sick and the lame, forgave people their sins, and he told his disciples they would do greater things: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matt. 4:23). He spoke and demonstrated the good news, and Robert Lewis describes Jesus' incarnational teachings in *The Church of Irresistible Influence*:

Follow me, he would say, and I will make you fishers of men. You are the light of the world, he would teach, shine in the darkness. You are the salt of the earth, he declared, make a tasteful difference. Nothing, he believed, would prevail against the power of the church: I will build my church, he said, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. By exhibiting, though everyday humanity, his life and love to the world, Jesus expected the church to supernaturally attract all men to God: If I am lifted up, he said just before his death, I will draw all men to myself.⁹

Incarnational ministry understands Jesus as the God of the universe who invaded human history and ushered in the Kingdom of God. Through Jesus, Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God and connected with what God does in the world as God advances His kingdom. Paul writes about the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). Incarnational

⁸ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community: The Posture and Practices of Ancient Church Now* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 90.

⁹ Robert Wilkins and Rob Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 27.

ministry manifests as the fruit of the Spirit, connects with the kingdom of God, and embodies what the Spirit of God does in the world. As Paul asserts, “We live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

The early church kept in step with the Holy Spirit, and the incarnational life of the apostles and early followers was influential and attractive. Outsiders saw their good deeds and praised God (Matt. 5:16). Halter and Smay write:

The ancient communities were a window between the kingdom to come and the kingdom now. As people watched the followers of Christ sacrifice their reputations, their possessions, and their physical lives, they found a story big enough for their hearts. Searching onlookers would take seriously the God of these people and their claims of a heavenly kingdom because they witnessed them holding this life so loosely.¹⁰

Scripture describes how the early Christians lived as Jesus taught them, and Paul lists incarnational behaviors and attributes:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Rom. 12:9-16)

The incarnational lifestyle began with Jesus Christ, spread to the disciples, and moved to other followers (Acts 1:15) throughout Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The early Christians knew the Holy Spirit converted hearts and lives to follow Jesus (Acts 2:37-38), and they joined the task of preaching, teaching, and sharing the good news of Jesus. Even then, a changed life changed lives. Outsiders saw how

¹⁰ Halter and Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 74.

Christians loved other people (Matt. 5:43-44), how they shared (Acts 4:32-35) and sought peace and harmony. They saw that when Christians were persecuted and faced death, they did not fight back and turned the other cheek (Matt 5:39). This radical behavior embodies what Jesus meant to these people and continued throughout the history of the Church. Dean writes in *Practicing Passion*,

Our Christian forebears knew full well that a change of behavior is at least as likely to produce a change of heart as vice versa, and thought enlightenment stemmed from doing “sacred acts.” As theologian Margaret Miles puts it, “Practices both prepare the conditions under which religious experiences are likely to occur and, subsequent to such experiences, provide a lifestyle that integrates and perpetuates them.” Thus, the “Acts” of the Apostles is the early church’s record of apostolic “praxis” that convinced people that Jesus is Lord, and that composed a convincing lifestyle for his witness.¹¹

A convincing lifestyle was the winsome tool of the early church. Their connections to Jesus’ radical lifestyle and the power of the Holy Spirit changed their attitudes, desires, convictions, and behaviors. Their goal was to live a God pleasing life, follow His commands, and emulate the life of Jesus. The result was an irresistible community, and the fruits of the Spirit manifested in their lives became so desirable to others that the early church could not be contained and grew quickly (Acts 2:46-47). Incarnational youth ministry can have the same irresistible influence on teenagers and their families.

Traditional youth ministry may create a shelter mentality because many youth ministers operate within the parameters of the local church. Most of the teenagers in these ministry programs are members of local congregations, and youth ministry is often

¹¹ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 158.

designed as a safe place for nurturing faith. Youth events are planned so students can experience community and live in relationships with other Christian friends. Bible studies teach young people how to live according to God's plan and avoid the world's sinful temptations. In this author's experience, parents may perpetuate the idea of safety and shelter within youth ministries because they want their children to grow up knowing Jesus and be protected from the harmful, dangerous world.

There is nothing wrong with the idea of a secure place for teenagers, and the church provides a safe environment for teenagers and other congregants. This attitude, however, may turn inward, and the focus on safety and shelter isolates the group from the outside world. They may find it difficult to love those outside the church because the outsiders do not support the church's ethics and morals. This psychology may create an elitist mentality that shuns the sinner along with the sin, and the aphorism, "love the sinner, but hate the sin" becomes "hate the sin, and keep the sinner out."

Rather than focusing on safety and shelter, Christians are called to be agents of change in the world. This is the meaning of incarnational ministry when Christians embody God's love in the world. Jesus did not turn away from those who struggled with sin to focus on those who had repented. Rather, Jesus called sinners away from their sinful lifestyles while he was in their midst, and he offered a better lifestyle. Matthew records:

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners?'" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt. 9:11-13)

Incarnational youth ministry prepares students and families as change agents, rather than isolating them so they can survive the storm of adolescence. Teenagers are very open to suggestion and influence and parents naturally want to limit negative suggestions and influences. In this author's experience, this often has a contradictory effect because teenagers desire what they are told they can't have. Families who live an incarnational life do not avoid the negative; they seek to transform it. Rather than forcing teenagers to avoid friends who demonstrate negative behaviors, incarnational families share Jesus' love and a different way of living. Incarnational lifestyles embody Jesus' behaviors, ideas, and values, love as he loved, and care for neighbors in powerful ways. This is based on the difference between intellectual theology and lived theology.

Intellectual or biblical theology is a study of what the Bible teaches. Through careful examination of the text, individuals study the Scripture's original audience, time, and place of proclamation, and how the verse or content connects with the rest of Scripture. This is intellectual, head knowledge. The Pharisees had great knowledge, understood the law of God and how they were supposed to live, but they misunderstood the heart of God. Christ called them "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27-28). Their lived theology spoke a different language.

Lived theology deals with people's actions rather than what they know, and lived theology reveals belief through observable actions and decisions. As fallen sinners, lived theology will never be the same as biblical theology, although the gap between incarnational ministry and life decreases as Christians witness to Jesus Christ, according to this author's experience. Those in the emerging culture compare how people live with

what they espouse, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”¹² Christians are called to live as Jesus lived, and love as Jesus loved. In this author’s opinion, the safety and shelter mentality produces a poor lived theology that hides from sinners, does not love the world, and makes little impact on others for the love of Christ.

Lewis and Wilkins write, “But the real truth is, where is the love of God we talk about? Where is the transforming power of Christ? The changed lived? The selfless giving? The good works? While the world waits to *see* it in their communities, the church is consumed with talking about it in their sanctuaries.”¹³ Lewis and Wilkins suggest the church has slowly turned inward and focuses on the needs of Christians at the expense of those who do not know Jesus. Christians can partner with the Kingdom of God and live the Word of God in action when they move from an inward focus to an outward focus. This is the essence of incarnational Christianity and ministry that embodies Christ. Lewis and Wilkins assert the church’s “irresistible influence” happens when “Church life has shifted from proclamation to demonstration.”¹⁴

Teens are not looking for perfection or a teacher who is holy, rather they want authentic, genuine connections to God and a theology that puts actions first, words second. Incarnational youth ministry provides opportunities for teenagers to practice their faith so that they grow to mature followers of Christ. This Kingdom connection provides

¹² As quoted in Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, 248.

¹³ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

the truth and authenticity that young people crave, and it will anchor them to the radical God who demands so much, yet who has given even more. Without this anchor teens run the risk of seeking authenticity in worldly places that are sure to disappoint, shame, and isolate.

Closing the gap between biblical theology and lived theology involves integrity, which is the ability to match words with actions. In *The Second Coming of the Church* George Barna writes, “The stumbling block for the church is not its theology, but its failure to apply what it believes in a compelling way. . . . Christians have been their own worst enemies when it comes to showing the world what authentic, biblical Christianity looks like.”¹⁵ This dilemma is old because sin causes Christians to fall short of the glory of God. Christians can seek forgiveness and restoration as they move forward as a forgiven people and love others through incarnational ministry, as Jesus did. Decisions about the reality of Christ are affected by connections to those who call themselves followers of Jesus. Actions that match words provide solid ground upon which teenagers can develop into genuine, lifelong disciples of Jesus.

Incarnational youth ministry proponents seek ways to live what Christians teach and preach. The goal is to combine actions with words and provide a witness that causes people to see the good works and praise the Lord. Lewis and Wilkins claim, “We have focused on the Word to the exclusion of the greater and more powerful reality of ‘making the Word flesh.’”¹⁶

¹⁵ George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), 5.

¹⁶ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 210.

Actions speak louder than words as Peter Rollins claims in *How (Not) to Speak of God*: “God is not revealed via our words, but rather via the life of the transformed individual.”¹⁷ The transformed individual involved in incarnational ministry has experienced the Father’s love manifested in the Son and experienced through the Spirit. The consequence of these experiences is an incarnational lifestyle that embodies Jesus’ command: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37-40). This changes what Christians think and how they act. Lewis and Wilkins write:

Unless the church rediscovers its primary role as bridge builder, the incarnational power of the gospel will remain hidden, and the credibility necessary to reach a culture of cynical, experiential, and spiritually hungry souls will be lost. Even worse, the church’s incomparable message of eternal and abundant life, despite relentless weekly proclamation, will continue to be largely ignored. People will simply no longer listen to or attend churches that seem incapable of living out what is preached. Bridges of influence—tangible and evident through the lifestyles and good works of believers—are the only answer.¹⁸

Incarnational youth ministry combines words and actions, thoughts and deeds, language and love. Teenagers who live as redeemed by Christ can be change agents in their communities.

Lewis and Wilkins describe how to create an incarnational community that influences the world. It begins with integrity and matches words with actions: “And any

¹⁷ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2006), 42.

¹⁸ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 177.

proclamation to the world of the love of God without authentic incarnation is hollow. We need both. And both is what irresistible influence is about.”¹⁹ This is not an easy process because incarnational life requires radical changes in how Christians spend time, money, and influence. “The movement . . . from preoccupied self-absorption to radical and sacred self-giving—is the movement of faith *in* the real world and *to* the real world. The very places where ministry and life get messy.”²⁰ Lewis and Wilkins’ “irresistible influence” is the idea that when Christians live out the love of Christ in action, people see what they do and are drawn to God. The writer of Matthew wrote about this: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

A church with irresistible influence is structured for hands-on experiences, personal ministry opportunities, and community investments.²¹ These principles apply to youth ministry because teenagers can have opportunities for hands-on service. Rather than just talking about Christian service and community involvement, incarnational youth ministry programs provide opportunities for these activities, and for example, replace an activities fellowship night with a service project. The fear might be that students will not show up, but the reality is that once they get a taste for kingdom work and connect with God in the world, they will come back and other teens will follow them.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Ibid., 93.

²¹ Ibid., 76.

Teenagers can also discover their God-given gifts, talents and abilities, and they will learn how God prepared them for service in the Kingdom. This gives teenagers opportunities to know that the God of the universe created them with unique gifts, talents, likes and dislikes for His Kingdom's work. Finally, incarnational youth ministry can plan budgets and resources that value the Kingdom's work and God's lost children. This may require lower budget for big bands and guest speakers and more money for needy families and friends.

This program is tangible, embodies Jesus, and shows the love of Jesus to the world. Halter and Smay discuss this tangible aspect, "The function of the church is to be God's missionary hands to a world that is looking for something tangible to grab onto."²² Incarnational youth ministry can provide tangible, meaningful connections to the community, especially the local high school: "When someone adopts a child, brings a kind word of encouragement to someone in jail, renovates a dilapidated home in the inner city, mentors a struggling student, plants trees in an ugly city block, plays music for the elderly, or throws a party for friends . . . it's all Kingdom, and it's always good news!"²³ Teenagers can support children from other countries by collecting money, writing letters, and supporting their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Work parties and servant events can be regular, normal youth ministry routines and not just once a year project aimed at some far off place.

²² Halter and Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 108.

²³ Ibid., 90.

Incarnational ministry is discussed and taught, and it is something to be participated in and experienced. Sweet writes,

The incarnation—God taking on human flesh—is a participatory event. But we have made it representational. God did not send a representative to earth. Neither did God dispatch some prophetic plenipotentiary to have a meeting with us. God sent “very God of very God” to be one of us. Even in the incarnation, God invites participation; Mary had to say yes: “May it be to me as you have said.” Jesus was God in the flesh, summoning us to be sent and spent in mission in the world, in partnership with our Creator. We are participants in Jesus resurrection life and partners in creation. We too, bring things to light by participating in the divine life.”²⁴

Incarnational youth ministry in the emerging culture provides participatory opportunities that embody God’s love for this world and acts as Jesus acted. The kingdom’s work will be done as youth ministry unleashes the creative capacity of teenagers and allows them to dream, create, and do incarnational ministry. Lewis and Wilkins write, “Anything done in the name of Christ, in the name of love, is ministry. *Anything*.”²⁵

As teenagers learn what incarnational living means, youth ministers and programs can help them understand how they treat people reflects what they believe. The method is to teach them, walk with them as they practice their faith and love the world as Jesus did, and as a result, they will have opportunities to share their faith. Halter and Smay assert, “If you’re truly living the good news, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to explain the theological aspects of the gospel. But if we continue to lead off with words about the gospel instead of acts of the gospel, we’ll continue to jip people.”²⁶ Teenagers will be

²⁴ Sweet and Hammett, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 82.

²⁵ Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 99.

²⁶ Halter and Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom*, 91.

relieved that they need not tell all of their friends what they believe. They are not called to be evangelists who try to convert their classmates; they are called to live as redeemed human beings, loving, caring, forgiving, and serving their community. This is incarnational ministry.

Incarnational youth ministries and leaders can partner with parents, work with teenagers, and provide opportunities for service and training. Incarnational programs and ministers must support families and echo parents' teaching, but if parents do not live incarnational lives, the impact on teenagers will be greatly diminished. If parents turn outward to the world and bring their teenagers into community connections and service, they will create life-long patterns of faith that connect words and actions, thoughts and deeds, biblical theology, and lived theology in effective incarnational youth ministry.

The next chapter describes the power of intergenerational youth ministry in support of this paper's thesis. The thesis is that youth ministries can connect effectively with teenagers through missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational strategies. The intergenerational strategies meet the needs and fit the mindset of emerging culture members inside and outside the church.

CHAPTER 6

INTERGENERATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

—Deuteronomy 6:4-9

This paper's author believes youth ministry in the emerging culture must be intergenerational in order to connect teenagers to a larger segment of the body of Christ so that their faith is not rooted in peer connections solely, but to the full riches of the local church that will assist them as they move beyond high school to remain connected to Jesus and his bride the Church. The historic development of youth ministry and youth ministers led to a segregation of age groups within the local church, and often youth group settings were young people's only connection to the local congregation. Church ministries created special worship services, Bible studies, mission trips, and fellowship opportunities for teenagers, and they could be active members of the youth ministry program without ever participating in congregational life.

This approach is contrary to God's plan, the effective methods of the early church, the standards of the Christian church for two centuries, and it does not work. This is not to say that God is limited to faith transmission within the family context, but that He has

provided a blue print for passing on the faith to the next generation. This author believes segregation creates a youth subculture within Christian congregations that causes decreased spiritual development, church growth, and kingdom impact. This segregation also removes youth ministry from its greatest ally, the family. This paper demonstrates that the family unit was created by God, is essential for faith transmission, and parents are to teach and instruct their children in the way in which they should go (Eph. 6:4, Prov. 22:6).

The writer of Deuteronomy writes:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Duet. 6:4-7)

As described earlier, this passage is known as the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for “hear.” The Israelites were to recite this verse twice a day, and probably Jesus recited this passage with his parents regularly. Jesus knew this passage and its importance because, when pressed by the Pharisees to identify the most important commandment, he responded by quoting the Shema. Ben Freudenburg and Rich Lawrence write about Christianity and families in *The Family-Friendly Church*: “The point is, [Christianity and its teachings] should be so familiar to kids—because families talk about them so often, as well as living by them—that they’re just a natural part of families’ everyday lives. That’s

called an integrated faith.”¹ God’s design directs families to teach the faith from one generation to the next.

Deuteronomy records Moses’ words:

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.” (Duet. 4:9-10)

Freudenburg and Lawrence comment on Deuteronomy, “What’s Moses saying to his ‘congregation’? I think he’s saying, ‘Don’t ever stop putting your children into situations that will help them learn about God.’”² This is the core of intergenerational ministry: adults who place teenagers in situations where they experience God, talk about faith, and discover together what it means to follow Jesus. These situations should include connections with parents, other adults from the congregation, as well as peer-to-peer opportunities. Intergenerational faith transmission requires more than one experience, curriculum, or class to pass on the Christian faith. God is everywhere, and experiencing God can happen anywhere and with many people. Intergenerational youth ministry seeks to return parents to the role of primary teachers of the faith while at the same time providing secondary reinforcement through adult connections and age specific and age appropriate opportunities.

¹ Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Vital Ministry, 1998), 103.

² Ibid., 102.

Intergenerational ministry begins with parents who engage their children in spiritual conversations and faith sharing. As families discuss God and faith with one another, as the Shema directs, the church and youth minister become more effective supporters of homes and families. Families that practice spiritual conversations, speak about God, teach God's commands and live accordingly, will pass the faith on from one generation to the next. Paul describes this when he writes to Timothy, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Tim. 1:5). Paul references how faith is passed from one generation to the next, through families. God's design is that parents teach their children, and like behavior and values, hair and eye color, likes and dislikes, the faith passes from one generation to the next.

The author of this paper believes a gradual paradigm shift occurred within the Church and youth ministry in the United States, and many families look to the church for expert teaching and advice for their children. As discussed earlier, this shift created many youth ministry roles and programs, but it did not guarantee that the faith was passed from one generation to the next. Intergenerational youth ministry provides no such guarantee either, but it increases the potential of passing the faith on to the next generation.

Freudenburg and Lawrence report,

It breaks my heart that we haven't challenged families to make Christ a higher priority in their day-to-day lives. We've simply rubber-stamped families' decision to let the church teach their children the faith. We've been lulled into perpetuating destructive patterns, and we have even championed those patterns by the way we've structured our churches.³

³ Ibid., 27.

This should be no surprise when Christians understand God's design for home-based spiritual development. Incarnational youth ministry can shift the paradigm back towards churches that support families.

Youth ministry was born in an era of divorce and de-emphasis of the family unit, and youth ministry practitioners faced difficulties in family ministry when mother, father, and children no longer defined the family. It is therefore important for youth ministry in the emerging culture to develop opportunities for teens to connect with their parents, as well as surrogate parents for those whose parents are disconnected or uninterested in sharing Jesus with their children. It is also still vital to have age specific and age appropriate ministry opportunities that assist teenagers in their faith development, especially when their parents are not connected to the local church. The author of this paper believes that youth ministry in the emerging culture should avoid the trap of separating from parents and adults because not every youth has vested parents. The creation of a youth subculture reinforces the societal problem of the broken home. Peer-to-peer youth ministry, therefore, should be developed in the context of the entire congregation, rather than separate from it. Intergenerational youth ministry recognizes the need for family ministry, as Doug Fields writes in *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*:

Youth workers are becoming increasingly aware that a student only youth Ministry is less effective than a family-friendly youth Ministry. Because we rarely see students in their family context, we often underestimate the power of the family. Each student in our youth Ministry is the product of a unique family system, a system responsible for forming beliefs, values, and actions. If we plan to effectively minister to students over the long haul, we must sincerely desire to

minister to entire families, because a youth Ministry that excludes parents is about as effective as a Band-Aid on a hemorrhage.⁴

The family and its values are central to intergenerational youth ministry, and this requires development of opportunities that bring the congregation and all generations together. It begins with parents and expands to other adult congregants as Gary Zustiak confirms:

A very important and practical Ministry to parents is to provide classes and programs which equip parents to effectively nurture their children in the Christian faith. Another idea is to provide opportunities for teenagers to interact with their parents and other adults and learn through observation and modeling. This interaction is sorely needed and desired by teenagers. A survey in the USA today of 1,200 teenagers found that 76% wanted their parents to spend more time with them.⁵

Intergenerational youth ministry can provide support as parents spend more time with their children. Teenagers are busy and seem to have little time for parents and family. Parents are also busy, work long hours, drive frequently to sports practices, games, recitals, musicals, and other responsibilities and demands. Youth ministry and the church can schedule family programs that unite family members and reinforce intergenerational activities. Faith development happens effectively in the home, and the church and youth minister can provide resources and training for family based faith nights in members' homes.

Intergenerational youth ministry does not measure success by event attendance; instead, the focus is on the home where parents pass the faith on to their children.

⁴ Doug Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 251

⁵ Zustiak, *Student Ministry that Leaves a Mark*, 299.

Freudenburg and Lawrence opine, “The church must be ready to train and support parents and the home to be the primary nurturers of kids’ faith. It needs to be less concerned about building good churches and more concerned about empowering parents to build good families.”⁶

A youth ministry colleague recently experienced a transformation when he led the church’s annual first communion class for fifth graders and their parents. A mother called a week later, was sorry her son had missed the class, and asked if a make-up class was scheduled. The colleague did not want to deliver a two-hour class for one person, and he told her to wait until next year. He thought better of it, emailed her the power point he presented the Sunday before and said: “Go through this with your son—if you have any questions, call me.” The boy came to the church the next Sunday, proudly held out his hand for communion, and his mother dabbed her tearful eyes. This colleague said:

All these years, we’ve been mouthing the idea that our job is to “equip the saints;” we pay lip service to partnering with parents, but my first reaction to a parent wanting her child to take communion was, “No, he can’t do it until he takes a class that I teach once a year.” It’s absurd on the face of it, it’s controlling and it’s un-biblical.

Intergenerational youth ministry involves teenagers with parents. It involves students in the life of the congregation and connects them to adult congregants. When this is a cultural shift in reaction to youth ministry that created an isolated community. Dean writes, “The more disconnected youth ministry became from the worshipping community as a whole, the less often youth took part in the practices by which centuries of Christians imitated the Passion of Christ. Slowly, youth ministry devolved into a wholesome

⁶ Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family Friendly Church*, 74.

extracurricular activity with no real analog in the adult Christian community.”⁷ With no real connection to the adult community and congregation, students graduate high school and youth ministry, and often disassociate from their faith. Root suggests, “Parents are the essential agents of integrating the youth into congregational life and ministry.”⁸

In *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton note that many American teenagers are connected to Christian congregations. They believe teens have difficulty articulating their faith, understanding their church’s theology, and are not connected to the adults in their congregation. This leads to leaving church involvement after high school:

[An] important general way religious congregations may better engage youth is through simple, ordinary adult relationships with teenagers. Adults other than family members and youth ministers could be intentionally encouraged to make better efforts to learn teens names, to strike up conversations with teens, to ask them meaningful questions, to be vulnerable themselves to youth in various ways, to show some interest in them, to help connect them to jobs and internships, to make themselves available in times of trouble in crisis, to work toward becoming models and partners in love and concern and sacrifice. This would no doubt resound positively in broader areas of youth religious belief, commitment, and practice and in youth outcomes more generally.⁹

Intergenerational youth ministry in the emerging culture involves students in adult congregational life and connects adults to youth ministry. This is based on the assumption that students who are involved in the life of the congregation are more likely to stay involved in the congregation past high school. Rather than seclude the young in various age-specific ministries, youth ministers should look for ways to mentor students in the faith by connecting them with caring adults and the life of the congregation. This means

⁷ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 37.

⁸ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 210.

⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 269.

teenagers should have opportunity to sit on boards and committees and learn the processes of congregational life, be a part of decisions and process, and connect to adults who are not their parents or youth counselors.

The implications for this strategy are numerous because of the multiplicity of church activities, programs, and strategies. Teenagers can be present and active with adults in the choir, men's retreat, mission teams, women's ministry, Sunday school teaching, worship leadership, care and maintenance of the church campus, and many more. Root writes:

Rather than being its own isolated ministry, where adolescents are ushered to the youth room never to associate with the rest of the congregation, adolescents are integrated into the church community. This happens as adults become partners in ministry. Those who prefer isolating youth with their peers will undoubtedly resist moving youth ministry into the center of the church's congregational life. Thus it is vital that parents and families demand that their children be included in ministries, and work to open up the power structures (such as committees and groups) to their own children and other adolescents.¹⁰

The separation of teenagers from the adults in the congregation may lead to an unconnected faith and a sense of abandonment. Clark writes about adolescent abandonment. He sees this as a cultural epidemic that extends beyond the church and youth ministry, and includes schools, parents, and communities: "Adolescents have been cut off for far too long from the adults who have the power and experience to escort them into the greater society. Adolescents have been abandoned."¹¹

¹⁰ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 210.

¹¹ Clark, *Hurt*, 21.

Dean cites a 1997 longitudinal study of adolescent health, which stresses the importance of adults who are “actively engaged in supervising and setting goals for teenagers’ lives as the most powerful factor determining their well-being.”¹² This approach is opposite conventional youth ministry techniques that built age specific and isolated ministries to nurture teenagers’ faith. Clark writes, “Contrary to what most adults may think, middle adolescents *want* significant relationship with adults who care about them.”¹³ The incorrect assumption that teenagers do not want to associate with adults may be the biggest challenge in youth ministry. According to Clark,

The only qualification an adult needs is the willingness and fortitude to authentically care. Once this foundation is laid, adults can focus on the three specific needs of mid-adolescents: 1. Youth need refocused, nurturing organizations and programs. 2. Youth need a stable and secure loving presence. 3. Youth need to experience authentic intimate relationships with adults.¹⁴

Effective youth ministry in the emerging culture is intergenerational, trains parents to be the primary teachers of the faith, and connects adults with teens in meaningful relationships. Clark says that teenagers “need adults who are aware of the power of small, deliberate, and consistently authentic applications of relational concern, care, and nurture.”¹⁵

Intergenerational, integrated programs do not eliminate age specific and appropriate youth ministries. Reid notes, “Limit segregation to those times when it’s

¹² Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 81.

¹³ Clark, *Hurt*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

absolutely necessary. This can include a weekly meeting; however, youth pastors should constantly ask the question, ‘How can I involve youth more in the life of the whole church?’ over, ‘How can I take the youth away from the life of the church?’”¹⁶ This approach moves away from a youth subculture to an integrated, intergenerational culture. This concept involves the tension of event planning, a search for students whose parents are not involved in the church, and acknowledgment of home as the primary place for faith development. Root writes, “The youth ministry then should not only be in a continued process of rethinking its own practices but should include adolescents in as many church-wide practices as possible. This will draw adolescents into congregational life and give them opportunities to encounter adults.”¹⁷

Freudenburg and Lawrence quote a version of an African proverb made popular by Hillary Clinton: “Teaching children and teenagers to have Christian values and character takes a village (the whole community).”¹⁸ This village includes parents who pass the Christian faith on their children, and caring adults who support parents and encourage young people. The village includes youth ministers who promote ministry opportunities that support the home, connects teenagers into the life of the congregation, and mentors and advocates who listen, care for, and guide young people into adulthood. The village includes surrogate parents who care for teenagers whose family lives are not

¹⁶ Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 176.

¹⁷ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 211.

¹⁸ Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, 88.

supportive nor fulfill God-given duties. Most important, the village includes congregants who assume the tasks of youth ministry in a collaborative effort with the youth pastor.

Important questions should be kept before the congregation and youth ministry as they plan strategies, events, and programs designed to pass the Christian faith to the next generation:

- How can we connect teenagers to the life of the congregation?
- How can we create opportunities for meaningful relationships between teenagers and adults?
- How can we give parents the resources to be the primary teachers of the faith?
- How can we partner with parents in passing on the faith?
- How can we pass on the faith to the next generation?
- How can we give teenagers something to do that is spiritually compelling and challenging?

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

—Romans 11:33-56

This conclusion describes the author's personal journey that led to this paper, its conclusions, and program proposals. I grew up in the Christian Church, was an active member of the youth group, and remember family devotions and prayer times. The combination of my family, faith, church, and attendance at the Christian school operated by our church supported me and nurtured my faith. As a result, I have never doubted my relationship with Jesus. My faith has been a constant, although I have had times of closer connections and times of wandering in the desert. I thank God daily for this faith, and I know it was very important to my parents that I continue walking with our Lord.

I loved youth group as a teenager. There are many reasons for this; some were good, like studying the book of Revelation, and some were challenging, like meeting girls. I missed youth group experiences when I graduated from high school and went off to college. While at college, I was offered a youth director position at a church near my school, and my journey into professional youth ministry began.

I graduated college four years later with my youth ministry degree in hand, ready to change the world and serve as the best youth minister I could be. It did not take long for me to bring teenagers to our youth events, and I planned Bible studies that were “edgy” and retreats that were packed with fun and activities. I did not have parents involved in my ministry because the teenagers saw them as “un-cool.” Instead, I recruited young adults and those without kids in the youth ministry.

A few years later, the senior pastor reminded me that my job was for youth and family ministry. I thought that ministry to teenagers was good for the family because it kept the participants occupied and gave their parents time off. Needless to say, I missed the whole picture and felt the need to go back to school. I began a three-year process for a Master’s Degree in Family Life Ministry, which helped me understand the family in light of youth ministry and the value of connecting with parents. I re-shaped the confirmation program, included parents as small group mentors, and completely revamped Vacation Bible School to be family friendly. As I look back, those were the only two changes I recall. It seems like a lot of money and time spent on a degree just to include a few parents in confirmation and revamp Vacation Bible School.

I worked diligently to create a dynamic youth ministry and included the concept of attracting teenagers into the youth room and ministry. I was guilty, however, of creating a youth subculture, a teenage congregation separate from the adult congregation. I developed youth worship services that met every week, sometimes at the exact hour of congregational worship services. I built youth ministry Bible study programs designed to give students everything they needed in the seven years they were in the program, from

7th to 12th grade. I developed mentoring opportunities for older teenagers who mentored the younger ones. I worked hard, fought the culture, and eventually lost.

By themselves none of these programs or strategies is wrong or ineffective. Dropping youth worship so that teenagers can worship with the adults can be equally wrong and ineffective. Youth worship was developed to provide a relevant style of worship that included the music and teaching so that teenagers could connect to a God real and relevant to them. An adult worship service runs the risk of being boring and irrelevant to teenagers. Teenagers may turn away from God and dismiss Him as irrelevant, stuffy, and old-fashioned. The problem with youth-only worship is what happens after teenagers grow out of the youth ministry after high school? They lack connections to the congregational worship services, parents, and other adults. Leaving the faith and the church become all too common for teenagers after high school. Emerging youth ministries seek to connect teenagers with congregational worship services and work to make the services real and relevant so that when teenagers leave high school they remain connected to Jesus and the life of the congregation.

After years of spinning my wheels, working harder, faster, bigger, and better, fewer and fewer students attended the youth programs. This does not include the teenagers who spent their formative years in youth ministry programs and moved on to college. Sadly, I do not have records that track these students or know what happened to their spiritual walk after high school. I believed I was failing, but I didn't know why.

I realized the shift towards postmodernism and the emerging culture created a new type of teenager different from my friends and me when we were their age a decade

earlier. When I was in high school in the early 1990s, I attended every event and activity the youth ministry scheduled. I was very active in school sports, but never participated in a game or tournament on Sunday. I believed there was one way to get to heaven, and that the various religions of the world taught different things.

As a youth minister, I noticed students picked and chose events they wanted to attend based on who was coming, what was scheduled, and how it fit into their busy schedules. I saw students who were always busy on Sunday mornings with sporting events and recognized their attitude of inclusivity about world religions. I knew that the youth ministry I learned and the way I practiced no longer worked. I knew, therefore, that I had to go back to school to learn, grow, and understand what to do. I cherish the calling God gave me to love teenagers and serve as a youth minister in a local congregation. I wanted to honor this call with all my heart and life, and I knew that something must change or I would burn out.

The difference was George Fox Seminary, Leonard Sweet, and Leadership in the Emerging Culture. I learned about this program and discovered I could focus on an area I felt about passionately. I believed I could understand the heart of emerging generations, comprehend postmodernism, and find a way to connect teenagers with Jesus Christ. This means I began with a blank slate that could be inscribed with research and understanding, rather than trying to force my ideas into my preconceived notions.

I read a wide variety of authors covering a wide variety of topics and certain themes continually appeared. Prof. Sweet articulated these themes and said the church in the emerging culture needs to be “missional, relational, and incarnational.” I connected

these ideas to youth ministry in the emerging culture and realized “intergenerational” should be added. These concepts became the framework and conceptual model for my studies of youth ministry.

This paper presents a foundation for youth ministry in the local congregation. It is not a ministry blueprint, and it lacks step-by-step guidelines for a missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational (MRII) youth ministry. As a result some issues might not be covered in these foundational concepts: discipleship, prayer, evangelism, mission trips, retreats, and other topics.

Take discipleship as an example. Discipleship for teenagers, teaching them the basic tenets of the Christian faith, and helping them make real-life applications are important issues. In the past, the youth minister and staff pursued discipleship in youth ministry through study groups and cognitive exercises: “Join us on Monday night as we study God’s word.” Discipleship in the emerging culture works through the MRII framework, and raises basic questions: How can we connect a Bible study to the local community and relate to the issues teenagers face? (Missional) How can our discipleship program promote relationships with God and with adults in mentoring and prayer? (Relational) How does discipleship ministry for teenagers move beyond simple statements of truth and into actions? How can we help teenagers experience what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus? (Incarnational) How can our discipleship ministry partner with parents and the home as the primary place for spiritual development? How can we equip parents to teach their children the Christian faith? What can we do to support students whose parents are not involved or unable to teach?

(Intergenerational) Youth ministry in the emerging culture works through the MRII framework, deals with these questions, and develops a ministry that is faithful to God's plan, effective at reaching a hurting world, and connects students to a lifelong journey of faith.

The first time the George Fox Doctor of Ministry cohort 5 met, Leonard Sweet said that as we went through the learning process we would be changed, and many would experience a change in calling and role. These were prophetic words, and I was among those who experienced change. The challenges included the way I conceived youth ministry, my vision and goals for teenagers and the church, and how to realize the vision and goals. While God planted a new vision in my mind and heart, He also prepared a congregation with a new vision of youth ministry and a new era in congregational life.

On June 1, 2008, I began my new role as minister to students at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Springfield, VA. The new call and church meant I entered a culture committed to a new version of youth ministry. I joined a congregation that believed God called them to minister to students in a new way. They did not identify the new way, and they looked to me for new ideas and methods. The vision is forming for a congregation of youth ministers who work together and pass on the faith to the next generation. We created a student ministries leadership team made up of caring adults, loving parents, and excited teenagers. This group will educate the congregation, implement new ministry ideas, and help, support, love, and encourage me in the journey.

New ideas and strategies emerged as we thought through discipleship in the emerging culture. For example, rather than having an age-specific Bible study for high

school students and another for adults on Sunday morning, we will host a joint Bible study for teenagers, parents, and other adults. This is not a parenting Bible study, or a study on how teenagers can modernize their parents, or a Bible study designed to develop better parent-teen relationships. This Bible study includes an intergenerational group of people who learn together through spiritual conversations and an integrated faith. We average 85 people at this Bible study with only about 16 teenagers (which is the average number of teenagers before in the high school Bible study). Teens are free to sit where they want and with whom they want, which gives them the freedom of being with some peers along with some adults for the discussion time. We continually promote the purpose of this study, which has opened the door for adults to seek teenager opinions and points of view. There have already been some positive outcomes including the fact that the adults of the congregation are getting to know the teenagers. Those students who have been involved have been actively encouraging their peers to attend the study. This is a seasonal Bible study. After 12 weeks we will go back to our usual high school Bible study. We hope to provide both age appropriate and age specific opportunities and intergenerational opportunities when teenagers and adults connect.

We value and organize times for age appropriate teenage ministries, but we consider schedules, families' needs, and when, where, and what else might happen at that time. For example, we offer a senior high school Bible study in the basement of a member's home, and at the same time, we offer opportunity for parents to gather upstairs for prayer, discussion, and support. This honors the time commitment from parents and avoids age specific youth ministry opportunities that compete with the adult life of the

congregation. When churches plan youth worship at the same time as the adult worship services, they inadvertently send the message that teenagers should choose to be a part of the youth ministry or a part of the congregation. Intergenerational youth ministry allows for both, without the unnecessary choice. This is part of the intergenerational thrust of ministry.

The next big challenge is providing mentoring relationships for every student in our ministry. This requires the recruitment and training of adults willing and available to connect with one or two teenagers at least once a month. These relationships are not designed with a specific result in mind, but it is an opportunity for teenagers to be known and loved by adults who are not their parents. Teenagers mentored by caring adults can mentor younger students and connect them to the youth church ministry.

The larger goal is for all adult members to view themselves as youth ministers, connected to student ministries in one way or another. Hopefully, the common question at the coffee and doughnuts after church will be, "How are you involved in student ministries?" Everyone can play a role in student ministries because there is no limit to what can be done for students. Intergenerational youth ministry should look to provide opportunities for adults to connect to the lives of teenagers and the youth ministry, as well as opportunities for teenagers to connect to the adults and congregational activities. This author believes that every adult can connect with youth ministry. This means creating opportunities for various spiritual gifts, various skills and passions, and various faith maturity levels to be able to connect with the student ministry program. Adults may use their skills to lead small groups of teenagers, offer one-on-one mentorship, provide

administrative help, web design and support, photography, and direct dramas that can be used in worship. Only imagination limits the possibilities.

The goal is a congregation filled with youth ministers who love the Lord and teenagers, and who desire to pass the faith on to the next generation. Teenagers will be involved in every level of leadership and development. Families will be honored and lifted up as participants in God's plan for spiritual development. This congregation will love teenagers and mentor them as they journey from childhood to adulthood. The Christian faith will be passed on to the next generation who, in turn, mentors and encourages the next generation. Jesus will be lifted up as families live according to his plan as salt and light in the world. Christian service and impactful mission in the community will be transformed. This will be the result of a missional, relational, incarnational, and intergenerational youth ministry that connects effectively with teenagers and fits the mindset of members of the emerging culture inside and outside the church.

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