

The Traditional Model

Description

"We've always done it this way," describes the Traditional Model. It probably worked in the past; it may work in the present. But that doesn't even come up for serious consideration. "We're going to press ahead, confident that what worked for us years ago will work for young people today."

Churches that utilize the Traditional Model may be satisfied with the continuity and predictability inherent with it. In contrast, young people usually prefer something new or different (although not all young people are that way). Youth groups that follow tradition might have adult leaders who are controlling or who fall into the rut of doing things the way they were done when they were young. Traditional youth groups might have youth who don't think outside of the box or who mirror what they have seen adults do in the past.

Youth who will endorse the adult agenda get put into junior leadership roles. All others are ignored or corrected. Adults expect that the young people will grow up to be just like them. Budding new identities must conform to somewhat narrow and traditional norms. For example, some churches present Sabbath School or AY the way they have for years, even though it may have died or is on life support with adults keeping this youth program going. It may not reach young people any longer, but somebody prevents it from being changed or from pulling the plug.

It seems that anything new is automatically suspect and anything old obtains a ringing endorsement, at least for those in charge.

Critique

Some things change and some things don't. Young people don't think the same or act the same as children, and yet they have their same names and belong to their same families. Are youth leaders able to differentiate between what should change and what shouldn't? Are they secure enough to be open to change?

Often, people with strong orientations to "truth" and "control" and "fear" seem unable to differentiate a method from a truth; a preference from a pillar; a practice from a doctrine. Changing the order of service or how a group practices prayer might threaten the stability of the group. This brings into question issues of truth and the fear of being wrong. Anything untested can't be trusted, so nothing will even be tested, at least not by this youth group. That leaves the group with whatever somebody, somewhere, somehow tested in the past and found to be right.

Ironically, most young people who grow up being secure and feeling safe will launch into new arenas simply because they do feel grounded. From a foundation of strength, they readily broaden their horizons and willingly chart paths into new territory. Locking these young people into a Traditional Model would prevent them from discovering new insights. Confident of what they have received, they expect to find even more. They can't imagine that the rest of their lives will be spent regurgitating the same thing. Instead, they expect to continue to grow, building on the shoulders of those who have gone before.

Possibilities

Identify what is core and make that clear. Adults who have waited for years to finally be in control might need to give up their long-anticipated reign. They also face the possibility of young people leading those older into new arenas and taking in new vistas. Instead of praying hand-me-down prayers, all can begin to pray earnestly from the heart as explorers leave the fort and enter the wild unknown.

Once the core elements have been clarified, address these to the current target group. Be ready to change the methods to gain the desired result. Engage young people in the process. They are humans who should have input; not animals to be trained on a leash and then put in a pen. Hand off leadership and responsibilities to them. Expect it to be slightly different. Adults will actually have much greater influence if they do this while they still have input rather than keeping young people quietly submissive and then completely losing them once they can leave. Support them as they grow. It's easy for adults to forget what they were like at that age.