

The Youth Ministry Foundation

Tim Cross, Youth Pastor of the Collegedale Church

Abstract

God has designed the family and church family to be the foundation of youth ministry. Youth ministry efforts built on this foundation maximize both influence (DeVries, 2004, p. 63) and retention (Rainer & Rainer, 2008, pp. 122-125). Therefore, youth ministry models can be built on this foundation to ensure long-term effectiveness. This can be achieved by helping to develop the spiritual—relational bonds between youth, their families, and church families; as well as intentionally designing each youth ministry model for synergistic partnerships with families and church families. Consequently, the Seventh-day Adventist Church could reorganize the priorities of its youth ministry funding and structure in order to make effective youth ministry among families and church families the top priority. Each conference could develop an integrated youth ministry strategy that would align all youth ministry efforts to help build strong families and church families where teens are connected and serving Jesus.

A God Designed Youth Ministry Foundation

Deuteronomy 6 contains the most concise description of the fundamentals of God’s design for 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, NIV)

These words that Moses spoke just before his death are pregnant with vital information for youth ministry. Certainly Moses must have had great concern for the successful handoff of a passionate love for God to the next generation. As a result one can discover herein that God’s effective strategy for accomplishing this task is to weave a passionate love for God into the daily routines and conversations of life, starting at home and extending to the broader community of faith. One can also clearly discern the end goal of youth ministry is to lead young people to love God with every fiber of their being. Ephesians 4:16 affirms these conclusions

using the metaphor of a body, "From Him [Jesus] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (NIV).

Once again there is the undeniable picture of youth ministry taking place in the context of the young people being integrated with their families and church family. These two God designed institutions, family and church family, serve then as the foundation upon which all effective youth ministry models can be built. Every youth ministry model can be custom designed for each culturally unique ministry setting in order to serve as a bridge to take teens from where they are into an experience as is portrayed in Ephesians 4:16.

The Challenge of the *Homogeneous Principle*

The *Church Growth Movement's Homogeneous Principle* has made significant contributions to the proliferation of local church families working to target a narrow homogeneous demographic. The book of Ephesians, written to a group of people who were extremely diverse, challenges this pragmatic fallacy with a strong call to unity in cultural diversity (Eph 4:1-3). It goes so far as to use the metaphor of an intricately connected body to illustrate the church to this diverse group of believers (Eph 4:16).

When the *Homogeneous Principle* is applied to youth ministry resulting in the segregation of teens from other generations it is particularly disastrous. Rainer and Rainer's research documents the devastating results, "Our research reveals that if a teen has no adult interaction in the church, it's almost a guarantee he or she will drop out of the church" (2008, p. 124). Unfortunately isolating youth from their families and church families has become a common youth ministry practice (DeVries, 2004, pp. 21-33) and (Wright & Graves, 2007, pp. 46-52).

Influence and Retention Benefits of the God Designed Youth Ministry Foundation

However, the good news is that when a youth ministry builds upon the two institutions God created to disciple young people, the impact can be significant. Partnerships with families can exponentially increase the impact of a youth ministry upon a teen's life, "And when it comes to faith formation, the impact of parents is dramatic. Research now shows that parents who simply talk about faith in the home and who involve their children in serving alongside them can actually double and sometimes triple their children's chances of living out their faith as adults (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn, 2001, as cited in DeVries, 2004, p. 63). Also an intentional integration of teens with the local church family can have amazing results as well, "A pastor can reduce the dropout rate of teens from an almost certainty of losing students to only a 50-percent chance simply by getting adults involved in their lives!" (Rainer & Rainer, 2008, pp. 124-125).

Application in the Collegedale Church of Seventh-day Adventists

Since 2002 the youth ministry of the Collegedale Church has been on a journey pursuing the goal of partnering with parents and helping teens develop meaningful friendships with Christian adults. Certainly this adventure has not been without its challenges. However, progress has been made. Currently the heart of the spiritual programming revolves around home-based bible study groups for teens, but also including parents and other family members. A typical group has 20-50 people present, meets twice a month on Friday evenings, starts with a shared meal and then transitions into a devotional bible study morphing into a few smaller groups scattered around the house. Such groups are often initiated when

students are in seventh grade and continue for six years through graduation from 12th grade. The bible study groups are usually led and hosted by adults who are trained and coached by the youth pastor. For students in 7th and 8th grade adults facilitate the lessons and then during the 9th grade year the groups often transition to student leadership under the mentorship of an adult. The Friday night, devotional, student-led bible study groups are then complimented by Youth Sabbath School which is an adult led doctrinal bible study. Finally an active athletics program significantly increases the quality and quantity of adult-teen friendships as well.

The results have been mixed. However, many students have clearly indicated that the Friday evening bible study groups as well as their athletics coaches have been significant parts of their journey in connecting with God and growing spiritually during their teen years. It is also apparent that these friendships developed between the teens and adults continue well beyond 12th grade graduation and serve as spots of glue in the teens lives, helping them stick with the Collegedale Church, but more importantly continue to be followers of Jesus.

Implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church

DeVries observes that, "Only the church and the family can provide Christian nurture from birth to old age—even death. Almost all other groups students are involved in are essentially orphaning structures (2004, p. 87). DeVries goes on to describe orphaning structures in this way,

Orphaning structures provide support and connection for people only so long as they fit into the age group of that particular organization. Many orphaning structures provide teenagers with a high degree of support and involvement. But in the

end, without a connection with lifelong nurturing structures like the family and an extended family, a young person's life can easily become a fragmented and rootless search for identity. (2004, p. 87)

The implications of DeVries observations could be significant for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Historically the Adventist Church has placed a high priority on youth ministry ventures such as Adventist Christian education, summer camp, and conference sponsored big events like youth rallies and bible conferences—all of which typically take place away from families and church families.

Meanwhile, most local Seventh-day Adventist Churches do not have a well trained and experienced youth pastor helping to recruit, train, coach, and help develop a custom youth ministry that fits the culture and context of their ministry setting. The results are often inevitable: summer camp, the conference youth ministry events, and academies are often vibrant and engaging to the teens; and the local churches are not. This reality then tends to exacerbate what is often already a developmentally natural progression of segregation of teens from their families and church families, resulting in the young people often being orphaned from any significant long-term spiritual nurture. This then contributes to the soaring dropout rate of young Seventh-day Adventists which is evidenced by a US Adventist Church median age of 51 compared to 36 in the general population (Sahlin & Richardson, 2008, p. 5).

What should be done? It seems that setting the goal of helping families and church families become young peoples' primary spiritual nurturers would be an incredible step in the right direction. Then the next step would then be to have each Seventh-day Adventist conference develop an integrated strategy to achieve this goal with synergistic partnership

among all youth ministry entities within its conference i.e. Adventist Education, conference youth ministry, and each local congregation. Joiner observes,

Without an integrated strategy, parents struggle over how to partner with the church, programming tends to be isolated in impact, there is no consistent forum to evaluate and improve what you are doing, volunteers become disillusioned with the lack of direction, leaders and staff drift toward silo thinking, overprogramming and competing systems dilute your influence. (2009, p. 113)

As pastors continue to move the practice of their ministry more into alignment with their role described in Eph 4:12 "to prepare God's people for works of service" and as an integrated strategic partnership plan is developed with Adventist educators and conference youth directors; more funds could be made available to provide local churches with needed youth ministry training and coaching. Perhaps it is time to introduce district youth pastors into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These district youth pastors could specialize in recruiting, coaching, and training volunteers in seven or eight different local churches in how to run a custom designed, engaging youth ministry in their unique context. Also these district youth pastors could help facilitate a key a partnership with the local Adventist schools helping to make sure the students and their families are well connected in their churches. This could certainly help shift the youth ministry focus to the priority of families and church families.

Reference List

- DeVries, M. (2004). *Family-based youth ministry* (rev. ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Joiner R. (2009). *Think orange: Imagine the impact when church and family collide*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.
- Rainer, S. S., & Rainer, T. S. (2008). *Essential church: Reclaiming a generation of dropouts*. Nashville: B & H.
- Sahlin, M., & Richardson, P. (2008). *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A demographic profile*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry.
- Strommen, M., Jones, K. E., & Rahn, D. (2001). *Youth ministry that transforms*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Wright S., & Graves, C. (2007). *Rethink: Decide for yourself is student ministry working?*. Wake Forest, NC: InQuest.