Adult-Centered Youth Ministry
David Alan Black

Youth leader, stop and think. Please. Take an honest, objective look at your teenagers. In all candor, do you really need more programs, more bells and whistles, or more activities? How about integrating your teens into the total life of the church? And, while you're at it, why not concentrate your full, undivided attention on holding them responsible and accountable for their attitudes and behaviors? For sure, some people won't understand. But on the other hand, you will reap some amazing and rewarding dividends.

Need a place to start? Here's how. I want to challenge you to "notch it up" as you direct your youth programs. A truly biblical and Christ-driven approach can and must form the core for a revolution in youth ministry today. And that core is this: the overall objective in youth work must be to lead teenagers to Christian maturity (1 Tim 4:12). If you are not leading them to mature Christian adulthood, you may have a youth "program," but you are not accomplishing God's objective for teens.

To make what I have to say stick, I will be brief and to the point. Leading teenagers to Christian maturity involves at least three basic commitments on your part.

1. *Resist the temptation to give in to those who would espouse an "adolescent" approach to youth ministry.*

As I pointed out in *The Myth of Adolescence*, adolescence in our society has become a waiting period of leisure with few responsibilities and little or no meaningful contact with adults. This isolation from adults is one of the most harmful developments of adolescence and has provided a breeding ground for the rampant feeling of alienation among our youth today.

The way you can tell that someone believes in an adolescent approach to youth ministry is by the programs they develop to segregate youth from adults. Most youth ministries have their own Sunday School, youth missions, youth small groups, youth worship, youth evangelism teams, youth choir, youth discipleship programs, youth retreats, and youth outings. Youth leaders that have swallowed the myth of adolescence assume that by isolating the youth into their own independent subgroup in the church they will be better able to instill in them Christian values.

The truth is that this solution is worse than the original problem. Studies have shown that most teens lose interest in church during the eleventh and twelfth grades. This is because they have been "entertained" by their youth leaders, but nobody has ever integrated them into the real life of the church (which involves responsibility, not just fun and games). So focus on helping young people make the transition from childhood into adulthood spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

2. *Integrate teens with adults in every typical church setting.*

Please do not overlook this step! As one experienced youth pastor has written (Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1994] p. 49): "Teenagers will not learn the skills required of mature adults in a peer-centered youth Sunday-school class. They will not learn these skills by talking with their friends. The process occurs as the less mature repeatedly have opportunity to observe, dialogue and collaborate with the more mature."

Youth can and should:

- attend "adult" Sunday school.
- read Scripture during the worship service.
- lead in prayer.
- usher and pass out bulletins.
- sing with the adult choir.
- help with teaching Sunday school.
- serve as greeters at church functions.
- sit on committees in the church.
- work in Vacation Bible School.
- volunteer to serve meals to shut-ins.
- prepare care packages for the needy.
- do door-to-door witnessing.
- go on missions trips with other adults.
- adopt a grandparent (an elderly person in the church).
- visit nursing homes.
- visit children's hospital.
- set up a local food pantry.
- plan and lead worship.

Don't deny young people this kind of involvement with adults. If you do, you will be sending your teenagers into the world mentally, socially, and morally unprepared for the challenges of adulthood. If they relate only to their peers, they will remain trapped in immaturity. On the other hand, young people who have been fortified with significant adult relationships are consistently the ones who exhibit responsible behavior and who are able to resist involvement in negative behaviors such as rebellion, drug abuse, and promiscuity. Thus, the most important foundation a youth ministry can have in its work with teens is providing them with opportunities for significant dialogue and relationships with mature Christian adults. This is especially important for those teens who do not come from Christian homes and who therefore need a circle of adult Christians to model the Christian life for them.

3. *Finally, reject the myth that healthy development among youth requires a strong break with their parents.*

Although peers exercise some control over a teen's choice of dress, music, and entertainment, only when parents are extremely negligent do peers exercise more control over the teen's choice of beliefs and relational styles. It remains a fact that in the vast majority of cases parents remain the single most important influence in the development of a teen's character and personality. A recent study showed that young people desire experiences with their parents (*Journal of Research on Adolescence* 1 [1991]). Specifically, the study concluded that (1) equating the youth years with inevitable rebellion is inaccurate; (2) the predictable disintegration of parent-teen relationships is false; and (3) teens are more likely to support parental values than to be in conflict with them. This means that more of our programs in church need to be designed for the youth themselves to serve and lead while providing them with mature mentors.

To implement the above ideas, I would suggest that youth leaders encourage parents to have a rite of passage for their children when they turn twelve (just as I had with my own sons). To complement this, youth leaders can plan to have a

similar ceremony that welcomes the youth into the "big" church. Youth leaders themselves will have to redefine their ministries. No longer will they be "youth pastors" but "pastors to families," since their main strategy will now be to assist parents in raising a new generation of champions for Christ.

An adult-centered youth ministry is not a program to be added to a church's educational ministry plan. It is a *foundational* model with one primary goal: to equip all believers (youth included) to grow toward mature and responsible Christian adulthood. If this is your first priority, it will radically affect your philosophy of youth ministry. Instead of trying newer and newer gimmicks to get youth to attend your "programs," and instead of trying harder and harder to make traditional programs work, you will focus your efforts on those programs that equip parents to nurture their children in the Christian faith and those that give teens the opportunity to be with mature adults.

And remember: This is not a "new" model for youth ministry. It is simply a return to God's design for the church. Jesus had no organizational chart or curriculum. His priority was to call his youthful disciples "to be with him" (Mark 3:14). Jesus' ministry was relational, and ours should be the same. The Christian faith becomes real to teenagers when they see it lived out in real life situations.

In short, an adult-centered youth ministry is not about creating special programming for young people. The goal is to provide them with the kind of foundational relationships with Christian adults that will lead to spiritual maturity. In so doing we seek especially to connect youth from non-traditional homes (divorced, blended, etc.) with adult mentors. If our youth ministries are to become biblical and have a meaningful impact, they must reject the traditional model of highly programmed activities and instead give the central place to connecting young people to mature Christian adults.

"But are any churches actually implementing this model?" The answer is Yes. One sterling example is Hope Chapel in California. Rather than dividing up families and intentionally segregating meetings and ministries by age and marital status, Hope Chapel is committed to strengthening families by keeping them together as much as possible. As for teens, Hope Chapel has found that when teenagers are treated with the respect and significance due to young adults, and are channeled toward ministry and not the self-absorption of immaturity, they rise to the occasion and spiritually flourish. Their teens function in every possible position of service. No activities are provided that would group the young adults together for play or entertainment or that would reinforce to them that they have an identity separate from the rest of the adult community. It is not the belief of Hope Chapel that God does not work in youth groups, but rather that he can accomplish the same ministry—and much, much more—when teens are elevated to their high calling within the general body of believers.

During their teen years, when young adults are told they are not needed by society, they have a special need to belong to a community. Thus, while waiting for "adult" status as defined by their culture, they need to have a sense of belonging to a group of people they respect and from whom they can receive recognition. If adults make the church a community to which young people want to belong, they will be helping teenagers move more smoothly into mature adulthood. The Body of Christ can be a significant factor in the moral and spiritual development of youth of any age.

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