

Running head: CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF EXEMPLARY CONGREGATIONS

**CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF EXEMPLARY CONGREGATIONS
IN YOUTH MINISTRY**

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Abstract

This paper reports on results from research studies identifying congregations that have consistent and effective approaches to youth ministry. This paper will also report on my vision for youth ministry based on my involvement with an Exemplary Congregation in Youth Ministry (EYM). An EYM refers to congregations that consistently establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youths (teens, college students, young adults) and discovering what accounts for their effective approaches to ministry (Martison & Black, 2009). EYM is a deliberate practice of holistically integrating and contextualizing one's personal faith-based spiritual values into community with others. The development of successful youth ministry programs involves specific structural and spiritual mechanisms that are influenced by congregational involvement, activities, and support. This paper concludes that congregations that are deliberate in expanding and enhancing the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of young people have multifaceted means and long-term goals by which to effectively render such support.

Keywords: youth ministry, success, effective approaches, congregation, spirituality, participation, retention

Introduction

What attitude or behavior characterizes churches with successful youth ministries? What sets them apart from others? What makes up their spiritual DNA? What competitive edge do they possess? One can make a case that some churches are built for youth ministry success because they have a strong financial base. Others could well say that successful youth ministry programs are built on the backs of shrewd, charismatic, adept, and energetic leaders. Yet another group of people may determine that successful youth ministry programs depend on the youth involvement in church life.

While those factors are extremely important and do contribute to the overall success of youth ministry programs, in reality, when added together, these factors make up a small percentage of all that it takes to run a highly efficient and successful youth ministry program. The purpose of this paper is to determine the following hypotheses: (1) successful youth ministry programs inspire what is already present in young people (i.e., curiosity, spontaneity, initiative, ambition, and spirituality); (2) successful youth ministries spawn from successful adult ministries. The rationale for this study is to understand the dynamics involved in the development of a vibrant church community and the manner by which a set of principles can be applied to produce successful outcomes relative to youth ministries in various settings (e.g., small, mega, urban, suburban, or exurban churches). This paper also seeks to identify the characteristics involved in the development of successful youth ministry programs. The collected facts and data regarding this study may prove to be invaluable in that it has tangible implications for youth ministry designs in the classroom and real life settings.

The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry

When I returned to Madison Mission Seventh-day Adventist church in Madison, Alabama in 2005 as a full fledged, participating, tithe-paying, and faithful member after being away for five years, it was then that I realized I was a part of something truly awesome. This church which started as a grassroots movement with a special interest in young people was now a burgeoning congregation. This church, in ten years, had grown from a few dozen wandering young worshippers who spent more time worshipping in nature than in buildings because they simply could not afford to rent a church building on a regular basis, was now a congregation of over one thousand worshippers, worshipping in a 14,000 square foot facility on 17 acres of prime real estate. Six years later, this congregation would burn the mortgage note to this multimillion dollar facility (which is a converted full sized basketball gym, with an adjoining youth auditorium that seats over one hundred people). Furthermore, plans are now in place to build a 4,500 seat sanctuary. This church fits the profile of an EYM congregation.

How did this church grow so rapidly while other area churches within a 25 mile radius saw a plateauing and even a declining of their membership? Was it the inspiring vision of its leader? Is it possible that the voice of the church was the voice of the young people? Could it be that the founders of this church did what other churches failed to do, and that was to listen to the voices of their children? What made the difference?

Here is what made the difference— an emphasis on biblical spirituality, followed by worship, service, social action and community involvement, educational and health services, music concerts, sporting events, and much more. The success of Madison Mission was built on those foundations. While the sponsoring adults provided the initial impetus and financial backing

for these programs, it did not take long however before the young people caught the vision, and fully committed themselves in the church's life.

The idea is akin to teaching a teenager how to drive. After a teacher, usually a parent, feels as if the young person has demonstrated reasonable judgement and has a good handle on driving, the teacher then allows the youth to take independent control of the vehicle, albeit with lots of verbal correctives. *Modeling*, then *letting go* and allowing the youth to work at an activity until he or she had mastered the art leaves a powerful and lasting impression upon the mind. This action is called *trust*.

One of the greatest privileges that can be bestowed on a young person is that of trust. I remember the first time my flight instructor allowed me to fly solo—that impression was so powerful that I still remember the scent of the gentle breeze on that beautiful Sunday— October 3, 1999. One of the reasons this memory is so indelibly etched into my mind is because my flight instructor *believed* in me. In fact, it took him a few minutes of persuasive arguments and reassurances to get me to take the controls of the helicopter, to embark on my first solo adventure, might I add, at a *helicopter flight show*. It was easy for my instructor to believe in me because he took the time to model to me the dos and don't's of helicopter flight, and aviation flight technology. After reciting a quick prayer, I took the controls of that aircraft for the flight of my life, not solely on the basis of my confidence, but on the faith that I had in my instructor—I was assured in the *hope* he had for me.

Are you getting it? Are you beginning to see a connection? If I had sense any sign of a token gesture on the part of my instructor, I would not have *risked*. Often times, adults, in a desire to please young people, offer to them token gestures. This is say that they allow young people to take part in “spiritual” activities just to keep them occupied—to shut them up. When a

young person realizes (and he or she often does) that he or she is being *played* in the name of the Lord, this is analogous to committing the unpardonable sin against that young person. These types of behaviors create a sense of duplicity and presents a skewed vision of reality, and it is hard to reestablish or regain the trust of the youth who was left exposed and betrayed, on account of God. You see, in that young person's mind, if the adult church member who knows God personally can do such a thing, maybe God is no different.

Let us examine what the research says, but first, the intent of employing research for this paper is not to present an exhaustive list of strategies or techniques that youth leaders or churches can implement to shore up their respective youth ministry programs. Instead, the aim is to create awareness of the importance of attending to the historical context of young people—one that encompasses their broad social and spiritual realities. White (2007) posits that “Youth ministry approaches do not simply materialize fully formed in a publisher's catalogue as if delivered by a stork from heaven, but they are born of the messy flow of history—amidst the warp and woof of historical events, ideas and experiences.” McQuillan (2009) similarly proposes that the task of leaders seeking to reach young people may be to “redefine and re-express the myths and metaphors of Christian spirituality.” He adds, “Experientially, it may be to lead young people beyond frameworks to being able to meet *their* God and grapple with their own spirituality and thus facilitate an awareness of themselves and the world.”

In other words, a leader should constantly be asking him or herself the following questions. Firstly, am I willing to learn from young people? Secondly, am I willing to adapt to change and grow? Thirdly, am I willing be transparent in my evolving and often “messy spirituality” in order to illuminate the path of salvation for young people? McQuillan reasons “when [an adult] have not really experienced mercy, or forgiveness, the generosity of God, that

person has to bolster his or her religiosity with all kinds of heroic affirmations about the nature of God, and young people can tell it doesn't mean very much." He continues, "The challenge for the Christian churches and youth ministers is to get out of old paradigms and limiting faith proclamations, and begin to speak to a new generation that yearns for spiritual experience and connectedness." Contemporary practical theologian, Kenda Creasy Dean in (Myers & Jackson, 2008) says "Youths are searching for something to die for." Moreover, Deans asserts that,

Unless Christian theology retains a central place for the Passion of Christ—And unless the Christian community engages young people in practices that identify with Jesus' suffering love—youths looking for something 'to die for' will, inevitably look elsewhere. Young people seem to be disillusioned with the church due to its presumed inability to present faith as something that truly matters for real life (that is, worth dying for).

It's All About the "Culture of the Spirit"

According to Martison & Black, EYM congregations "present a portrait of the strong impact faith communities can have on the faith and lives of young people when churches set their minds to fully enfranchise young people in their lives and ministry." They also maintain that "when pastors, congregational leaders, parents and adults leaders work together to promote real commitment to youths as *full* members of the body of Christ and carry that commitment across the life and mission of the entire congregation, young people will mature in faith and grow to respect and love their church." Maturity in the faith does not come about by token gesturing or ostracization. There must be a change in the congregational dynamic and culture.

This is to say that three things must be avoided in order for churches to *grow* successful youth movements. Myers & Jackson argue that "the prevalence of cheap grace in many churches is construed by young people as unrealistic and disconnected from both the biblical witness of Christ's passion, and from the ongoing suffering of Christ among God's people." This is a direct

call from the young people for adults to stop the spiritual servility and become engrossed in practical and biblically spiritual programs that has teeth, which is to say, programs that can have a direct and positive effect on the lives of the spiritually disenfranchised and the religiously marginalized.

“Second, the church and the life of faith are often presented as other-worldly. Within this framework, young people erroneously interpret engagement with one’s faith as synonymous with disengagement from the world” (Myers & Jackson, 2008). This is the place where transparency plays a vital role. Young people do not need to emulate another famed Hollywood actor pretending to be something that he or she is not. In reality, they are looking to rub shoulders with flawed adults who are able to communicate to them the best ways by which to handle life’s challenges, and maneuver around some of life’s precipitous chasms, in their quest to find God. Myers & Jackson additionally posit that “the presupposition of adolescence as a phase or holding pattern in which young people wait to become contributing members of society prevents the church from engaging youths in a way that suggests faith matters now and not just later”, which is a call to get them involved *early and often*.

Let us revisit this concept of *congregational culture*. Martison and Black pointed to a congregational “culture of the Spirit” which is something more basic and central in establishing vital faith in young people.

Martison & Black research offers the following:

The value of a congregation’s culture endowed with a palpable sense of the living, active presence of God at work (1) in the people of the whole congregation; (2) its ministries with you; (3) its parents; (4) the ministries of the larger congregation; (5) its congregational leaders (pastor, youth minister, adult, and youth leaders) as providing the most powerful, pervasive influence these congregations have on young people long-term. The researchers argue that it is the communal awareness of participation in God’s presence and action that permeates the values, relationships, and

activities of these congregations, giving rise to an atmosphere, a “culture of the Spirit,” focused on mission and the transformation of the life that seem to make them so influential in the lives and faith of young people.

Accordingly, the “culture of the Spirit” among EYM congregations involves four spheres of relationship and practices that intersect and powerfully influence the lives of young people. These four spheres are *intergenerational, age-level ministries, parents, and leadership*. The intergenerational concept according to Martison & Black says that young people will be integrated into the daily life of the church. Whatever ministry (e.g., worship, education, fellowship, outreach, and decision-making) adults are involved with, the young people will also participate. This idea is more than participation however; it is about having the young people to take ownership through both participation and *leading*.

Age-leveled ministries according to the researchers, involves “trusted relationships and custom-designed ministry practices and activities within a caring atmosphere of high expectation.” The word *custom-designed* should not be ignored as it can make or break the spirit of the youth who is desirous of becoming involved in the life of the church. Here is what I am saying. On my daughters’ first day of band class, they had to try out multiple instruments, and find their right fit. After trying out a few instruments their band teacher found the exact instrument that matched their unique abilities.

The younger twin (Kahilah) was more adept on the trombone, while her sister (Kalilah) was more proficient on the clarinet. The process of fitting them with their respective instruments was not a generic “one-for-all” fit. The instruments were not matched to them solely based on their interests, but most importantly on their ability. Is this to say that a young person who lacks the gift of singing should not be doing solos in front of the church? Yes, that is exactly and unequivocally what I am saying. While some may disagree with this notion, I think the staying

power of EYMs rest on the fact that these congregations recognize the unique giftedness in individual youths and help the youths in their development of those gifts.

Kahilah (the trombonist), at first, did not desire to play this particular instrument. She anticipated playing the alto sax, but she simply could not get this instrument to generate a less than snarly sound. Her teacher, the professional, upon recognizing her struggle, said to her “Good job Kahilah, stick with it.” No! She did not say that.

The band teacher guided my daughter to an instrument that matched her (my daughter’s) ability. It is going on three years since that first day of band, and my daughters are on their way to becoming accomplished musicians, in their own right. Furthermore, since both continue to learn the fundamentals of music, they have picked up second instruments. This musical maturity would have been less likely to occur if they were not first given the opportunity to build on their unique abilities.

At the heart of *age-level ministries* is building “multiple nurturing relationships and activities intentionally planned to create an atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging that generates an alternative youth subculture,” a movement committed to the effecting change—real and lasting change in the lives of others, even as they emulate the work and person of Christ (Martison & Black, 2009). Another important factor that defines EYM congregations are *parents*. EYMs educate parents in the faith and equip them for family/household caring conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service. Leadership is the fourth factor that plays a significant role in the life of EYMs. This leadership model is built on competent, faith-filled individuals who are committed to young people and developing their faith lives.

Creating Space for God

One of the most notable features of Madison Mission in respect to the way they ministered to, and with maturing Christian youths was by allowing them (the youths) to grow at their own pace—that is, *creating space for God*. The senior pastor appropriately appointed a youth pastor, not an old man with the title of *Youth Pastor*, but a *young person* chosen from among the membership to provide *peer*-spiritual support to his peers. This youth pastor was a paid employee of the church. He was trained on matters of handling church business, homiletics, interpersonal relationship, and so forth. He was selected, encouraged, trained, and sent to work among his peers. The church leadership, which included young people, realized that young people have a different concept of God, spirituality, and religion than adults. Their spiritual growth is marked by changes not experienced by adults, and for this reason the Madison Mission church leadership felt that it was best to appoint someone with similar life experiences to guide his peers.

So far, this move has been largely successful. Success in this sense means retention, baptisms, recommitments, and steady growth (among the young people). Another strategic move that the church leadership decided to enact was to put in place a children's pastor. This person would be responsible for the spiritual well-being (e.g., Bible literacy, baptism preparation, children's church) of children from birth to twelve. The success of having a children's pastor has even won over the initial skeptics. EYM congregations do not have a problem with implementing new ideas and practices that will add to the spiritual vitality of the body of Christ.

Creating space for God means recognizing that each person is part of the *priesthood of believers* [You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his

wonderful light, 1 Peter 2: 9 *NLT*]. This concept of the *priesthood of all believers* implies partnership between adults, youths, and children in all expressions of ministry. This idea shouts, “This church is mine too!

Damsteegt (2000) argues that “distinctions of race, social position, economic status, and gender are no longer valid considerations in ordering the church’s ministry.” Each person, according to him, is a minister within the body of Christ, meaning the church.” Damsteegt amplifies this by adding:

The New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers has eliminated the distinctions in roles between [adults, youths, and children] in the proclamation of the gospel. It is spiritual gifts that determine who qualifies for the various positions in gospel ministry [regardless of the church office]. These gifts have nothing to do with whether one is an [adult or young person].¹

To create space for God, according to (Hryniuk, 2005) means,

Nurturing contemplative consciousness in young people and help them to name and respond to the power of God’s presence within them and around of them in their daily lives. It seeks to support them in integrating the grammar of faith with their experience of the joys and sufferings of human life, and also equipping them to more fully appropriate the riches of biblical, doctrinal, sacramental, and practical consciousness in the Christian tradition.

The researcher also posits that to create space for God means to help maturing youths to

¹ As it relates to the concept of the priesthood of all believers the author suggested that the following. What kind of priesthood and spiritual nation did God establish after the cross? First, the Scriptures announce that Jesus Christ, our Lord, is our Priest (Heb 5:6; 7:11, 15; 8:4) instead of the Levitical priesthood. He is our High Priest (Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14, 15; 9:11), representing us before the Father. Instead of an earthly priest interceding for us, there is now one Mediator, Jesus Christ, who pleads our cases.

Second, the New Testament calls God’s people a royal priesthood and a holy nation. The new believers represent their Lord Jesus Christ and function as priests by delivering the gospel message to all the world. This new priesthood is to lead people to the heavenly High Priest through the gospel.

To enable His people to fulfill the great commission, Christ promised to give special gifts to this royal priesthood—to every member of His church—so believers could flourish in their divinely-assigned roles. Some would receive the gift of wisdom, others gifts of faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, languages, helps, or administration (1 Cor 12:8-10, 28). Others would receive gifts of ministry, exhortation, leadership, liberality, or mercy (Rom 12:6- 8). As a result of these divine gifts some were to be “apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11).

contextualize their daily life experiences (e.g., school, fun, games, boyfriend, girlfriend, church) into a larger experience of “attentiveness to God, discernment of the Spirit, and genuine accompaniment by faithful adults on the way to Jesus.”

The concept of creating space for God does not seek to remove the young person from his or her everyday life experiences. It is not about managing their lives either. It is not even about telling them about the wrongness or incorrectness of their attitudes and behaviors. It is not about trying to manufacture a false sense of spirituality in the lives of these precious souls. Creating space for God is about relationship—reconciliation, redemption, and restoration. God was so deliberate and intentional about relationship that when the Israelites were in the wilderness he told them to make a sanctuary so that he would live among them. Young people need to know that God desires to live with and in them.

Implication and Application

The youth culture is in constant flux resulting in a very short shelf life for ministry resources that do not evolve to meet their ever-changing demands. Burns (2008) argues, “The young people we work with today are different from those of any previous generation. They are more knowledgeable, have greater opportunities and are filled with greater potential than people of any other time in history.” This is to say that the activities that worked yesterday may not have any utility for today. For this reason, innovation and a continuous recasting of a vision is necessary.

Burns adds, “In order to meet the important needs of this generation of young people we must keep our ears and eyes carefully tuned to the rapidly changing storm of the culture.” Youth workers can help make a positive influence amid the frightening changes taking place. So, what can be done? What programs can be implemented to stem the tide of spiritual apathy, biblical

illiteracy, and religious truancy that exists among the youth and young adult population? How can we address the *trust deficit* that exists from the young people toward adults, or the *confidence deficit* that exists from the adults toward young people? From my experience and involvement with an EYM congregation (Madison Mission), I will offer several principles I believe any church can implement to *save their children*, their community, and their future.

First, it is necessary for churches to *invest* in youth ministry programs. Throop (2006) offers three reasons for investing in youth ministries. For the reason that spiritual growth and development does not stop in adolescence, it is necessary because “as young people move into adolescence and adulthood, they learn about greater issues and ask larger questions—as long as they are granted permission and have a safe place to express themselves.”

Throop offers a second reason to invest in youth ministry. He says,

Teens and young adults have an enormous amount of energy, which Needs to be channeled in a productive and meaningful way, learning how to think and act. That's why mission trips [local and abroad] are so valuable. They combine opportunities for young people to move through biblical reflection, multicultural interaction, and good, solid work in building structures, teaching children, or helping in a medical clinic. The experience can provide lifetime lessons.

The third reason it is necessary for churches to invest in youth ministries is to equip the young people for ministry and evangelism. A congregation will quickly fall into spiritual default if it is not proactive about reaching the unchurched, and those who espouse non-Christian or anti-Christian worldviews. Young people are not the *future* of the church; they are the church of today; hence, the necessity of involving them in evangelistic outreach. Throop declares “Churches also need to determine honestly whether they have a call to minister to young people, or if they should send them on to a church that is better fitted to work with them. But if they are

called to minister to youths, they need to put the money into programs and staff, and develop dynamic worship and ministry that reach young people *now*.”

The second principle that can be applied by churches interested in becoming more involved in the affairs of young people is *modeling*. Burns insists that “young people are searching for models. They are looking for people they can pattern their lives after. Free from dress and language to values—they are looking to musicians, athletes, actors and other celebrities to see what their lives should be like.” Burns adds that “young people need God-honoring role models and mentors who will invest in their lives and point them in the right direction.” He emphasized that the church’s calling in youth ministry today is to “provide a working model of what the Christian life looks like in the real world.” More than hearing about Christianity, says Burns, “young people need adults to come alongside them and daily live out their Christianity, to show them what it looks like in real life”—they need to see Christ in the person.

The third principle is to *accept* and *affirm* young people. The starting place is to point them to Jeremiah 1:5 *NCV*, which say “Before I made you in your mother's womb, *I* chose you. Before you were born, *I* set you apart for a special work.” And also to Jeremiah 29:11 *The Message*, which declares, [God speaking] “I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out - plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.” Young people need to know that they are loved, valued, appreciated, and have a special place not only in God’s kingdom, but also in the everyday life of the church. They need to be reminded that the church cannot continue without them, and will spare no expense as it relates to their holistic (i.e., spiritual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral) development—they are the *reason* for the church’s existence.

The final principle that I would like to share is *responsibility*. When Jesus ministered on earth he chose disciples with whom to share the joys and labors of ministry. After teaching them for a few years, Jesus placed the *responsibility* of sharing the good news to world on their shoulders. Burns asserts that “[young people] need to know that we believe in them and see their God-given potential. When we take the time to notice and develop the youths’ potential, they discover their value and significance. Unfortunately, we are often the ones who stand in the way.”

Burns also notes that “adults need to give to young people roles that express and develop individual spiritual gifts. Preaching, encouragement, leadership, administration and mercy gifts are just a few examples of gifts that need to be developed and expressed.” He further states that “God has placed within young people certain gifts and talents that need to be unlocked for His glory. We should [therefore] strive to develop opportunities and responsibilities that can help to develop their gifts and talents to serve God; however, it begins with us (meaning adults) looking beneath the surface, beyond what is there, to what could be.” Beyond peering beneath the surface, Burns continues, “We need to be proactive in creating hands-on responsibilities for young people to develop their gifts for the glory and honor of God.”

Conclusion

McQuillan declares that youth ministry is ‘vital work.’ He continues,

Given the capacity for young people to interact and communicate across the globe, this [generation and the] next generation can change the world. Our task as youth ministers is to walk beside [young people] with trust in the Holy Spirit that they can change it for the better. Environmentally, for the peace of all nations and the harmony of this global village, we must hope they can.

Hughes (2006) in McQuillan (2009) sums it up by saying: “Churches need to

respond...by offering resources to young people, rather than attempting to pass on a heritage.”

Throop believes that “churches face great challenges reaching youth and young adults. But if they can make the sacrificial investment to support worship, discipleship, and service, the young people will bring two dividends: a strong Christian community in the future, and a dynamic Christian community now.”

My Worldview in Relation to Youth Ministry

Education is the domain through which God has called me to minister to young people. Investing in young people based on relationship is the central theme that continues to inform and shape my personal and professional life. The framework of my philosophical worldview (Christian Theism) has given me permission to bring its principles into conversation with other people whose beliefs, values, orientation, and culture differ from mine. For the reason that my life’s story moves with the ebb and flow of knowledge and ignorance, humility and arrogance, transparency and uncertainty, and altruism and indifference, I am able to enter into the sphere of young people without judging or condemning, while honoring their dignity, and being an agent of grace.

Utilizing my story as a way to connect with young people allows me the occasion to observe, explore, and ask questions. Maintaining this awareness of the unknown while seeking clarity creates an environment of possibilities that leads to a sense of meaning rather than satisfying my personal agenda. There is a learning in the risking—the risk to be vulnerable and transparent. It is not the “pushing away,” but the “dancing with” young people that gives depth, meaning, and purpose to life—this is the essence of true religion.

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