

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY

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Recently I was able to be part of a panel discussion at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, BC. We were given a list of 36 questions that we could cover and one of those questions became the catalyst for what you're about to read. The question was this: *why is youth group failing (i.e. the majority of kids never go to church once graduated)?*

The answers the panel gave basically acknowledged that youth ministry is failing, and even went as far as to say it was dead. I would have been shocked by the comment, but it's something I've heard time and time again over the last few years. The problem is that I 100% disagree with the panel and with what I'm hearing from across the country. I do think youth ministry is changing, but it's definitely not dead... but for many, it feels that way.

Before we dive into this question, let's review where we have typically been in youth ministry over the last decade or two. This review is going to give us a place to start, but it's definitely not where I want to end.

WHERE WE HAVE BEEN

To understand where we are going, we need to first look back at where we have been. My question is, what did your youth ministry program look like when you were a teen? My guess is that it contained a combination of the following and then some: Worship, Teaching / Sermons, Small Groups, Events, Outreach, Missions, and Service Projects. Then, within those elements were a host of other things: Crowd Games, Icebreakers, Announcements, Offering, and Communion. The reality is, your youth ministry program likely contacted all or parts of each of these things. This is what I've come to understand as ***Traditional Youth Ministry Programming***.

These are all amazing tools/programs in youth ministry and they have been around for decades. They have helped us all further the Kingdom of God; there is nothing wrong with any of these things. The problem is, my youth ministry experience (1994-1999) was similar to that of the 1980's, and I see the same elements in youth ministry today in 2018 all across the country. The problem comes from that fact that our world is NOT the same as it once was. Frankly, it's not even the same as it was just five years ago.

See, this *Traditional Youth Ministry Programming* has all of these fantastic elements, but historically, they have existed independently of each other. You could also say that they could be ***plug-n-played*** as needed. This resulted in a traditional program that was passed down through the years in bits and pieces.

Let me illustrate it this way: think of each of these youth ministry elements as a puzzle piece with a particular shape and form. Each week, we (the youth pastors) typically grab the pieces we think we need to complete the youth ministry picture that we are going for that week. So, for example, if it's a large group teaching night, we would grab the...

- Sign-in piece
- Welcome / Announcements piece
- Mixer or Upfront Game piece
- Worship piece
- Sermon piece
- Snack piece
- Clean-up piece

Each of these things would be placed in order and, independent of themselves, they would form the outline of the night. Then next week, for a Small Group or an Outreach night, we would just swap out the necessary pieces and be off to the races:

- Sign-in piece
- Welcome / Announcements piece
- Rules piece
- Outreach Game / Activity
- God Talk piece
- Snack piece
- Clean-up piece

In many ways, there is nothing wrong with doing this... however, the challenge is that the *plug-n-play* nature of a traditional model means we can create a disjointed ministry that is always shifting and disconnected; pieces can go missing. These missing pieces and the lack of connectivity create the biggest problems. See, we are creatures of habit, and we tend to stick to what works. But as our world and students have changed, we have not adapted.

So, in our weekly scramble to create a picture that works, we end up missing important pieces or forcing things to go together that just don't work. They may not work for a variety of reasons, but over time it's like creating a puzzle where some of the pieces have been jammed together to fit. We think it should work, but in reality, it has created a distorted picture. We might have been able to get away with it for a season, but months become years, and years became decades of learned behaviour. What we are left with is *Traditional Youth Ministry Programming that doesn't connect with our changing world*.

THE CHANGE

When I started youth ministry, I was 19 years old and served at a small United Church with 6 kids in the youth program. I used a MONSTER old IBM computer, a CD copy of the King James Bible narrated by James Earl Jones, a copy of "Encarta", and there was a 26k modem for internet in one office only. Each week I would teach a Bible student based on a passage of Scripture and some book I took out of my school library. I made announcement sheets by cutting out actual "clipart" and gluing them on to the announcement paper to add some flare to our newsletter. I didn't know much, but I was seen as the authority in the room because I had access to the information. So, I would read and study up on topics like spiritual gifts, prayer, how to read the bible, the Exodus, etc... and then impart that wisdom at youth Sunday school a few times a month.

That was 19 years ago... and boy, have things changed!

Today, I use no less than 3 portable computers and 1 iPhone in order to write sermons and stay connected via email with the office. I have tons of theology books, self-help books, history books, youth books, prayer books, digital books, and even a book about how to do weddings, funerals, and house blessings. I'm also listening to a series of lectures from Harvard on the life of Ancient Israel given by a leading mind in the field, and I did it from my car with my phone. On top of all that, whatever I can't find in my own resource library or database (200 GB worth of files) can be found on the internet... with the touch of a button.

19 years ago, if I wanted some information about Egypt for a sermon or an overview of the crusades and I couldn't be in the school library, I went to "Encarta", the digital encyclopedia. It had everything I needed, or so I thought. By today's standards, the internet has hundreds of thousands, if not millions and millions, more articles and pieces of information. You can Google basically anything and find something to read, watch, listen to, or look at. At "Encarta's" height,

it had 62,000 articles. Wikipedia is widely considered the “Encarta” killer and, to date, it has 5,027,640 English articles.

This is the challenge; all this change has happened, and we as youth pastors have been frantically going back to the *Traditional Youth Ministry Programming* and grabbing as many puzzle pieces as we can to try and figure out a new way to do it... *but we are using the same old method*. Right now, across this country, youth pastors are frustrated and tired because they think youth ministry is dead because the pieces don’t fit together anymore.

But, it’s not **DEAD**. it’s just **CHANGING**, and here is what I think that change looks like:

CREATING A NEW FOUNDATION - Step #1

What I’m proposing is a new way of thinking about the foundation of youth ministry, basically redesigning what happens underneath all the events, programs, retreats, and opportunities. The best visual I’ve been able to come up with is that of a modern smart phone. It involves two distinct layers of support: the **WHY** and **Student Leadership/Influence**.

Let’s deal with the *WHY* layer first. For this one, I want you to picture an electronic circuit board. By definition, a circuit board is “*a thin rigid board containing an electric circuit; a printed circuit*”. These electric/printed circuits connect all the piece together and become a web of information and power that runs the device. What youth ministry needs is a new circuit board, one that helps connect the *WHY* statements of youth ministry:

- Why do we exist?
- Why do we do what we do?
- Why should students care?
- Why should leaders care?

Ultimately, we want to answer the greatest question of them all: *why does Jesus matter?* See, answering these *WHY* statements help us create a **Spiritual Circuit Board** that provides a foundation of connectivity and relationship that can in turn empower everything else we do. However, I want to take this one step further and suggest that, more than anything, our students need to know the *WHY* now more than ever before.

For me, this is embodied in a simple yet profound statement that **students are the best equipped to reach students for Jesus** when they understand that they are **UNIQUE**, here by **DESIGN** and not chance, and have a **CALLING**. Let’s take a moment to unpack this.

Firstly, every student is created to be **UNIQUE**. There is no one else in all of creation and human history like them, and there never will be anyone else like them. They are a **UNIQUE** expression of the image of God. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God specifically craft and form man and woman. He breathes life into them, and in Psalm 139, we see that God has “knit them together in their mother’s wombs”. This implies intentionally, but also that we are handcrafted by the God of the universe.

Secondly, every student is here by **DESIGN** and not chance. God has placed them in their “world” for a reason. Their family, home, school, work, bus ride, locker buddy, sports team... all of it was by **DESIGN** and not chance. The life of King David is a great example of what it looks like to be where you are by design and not chance. Between his annoying to be king in 1 Samuel 16 or the fact that as a shepherd he was the only one with the skills and faith to take down a giant, David’s life is a clear example of God placing someone in the world by **DESIGN** and not chance.

Finally, every single student has been **CALLED** to go into the world with all authority and power given by Jesus himself. The Great Commission, found in Matthew 28, was not specific to an age group nor education level. If students believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, then they are **CALLED** to go. That are in their world by **DESIGN** and they can do things that no one else can because they are **UNIQUE**.

It is those three words (*Unique, Design, Calling*) that make up the *WHY* and when combined with an understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, they create **heart-change** in a person's life. That heart-change empowers everything else. When our students know *WHY* both ministries matter, they get plugged into and connected with the new Spiritual Circuit Board. But because of the way a circuit board functions, everyone and everything become connected in relationship, and that is what powers this new framework.

CREATING A NEW FOUNDATION - Step #2

Once we understand our *WHY*, we need to place a new **FRAME** around the Spiritual Circuit Board. At the end of the day, it's the *FRAME* that holds the whole thing together. The reality is, we can talk about *WHY* until we are blue in the face, but if the *WHY* doesn't contain a tactile element... they're just *words on a page*.

It is here that I believe we move the farthest away from *Traditional Youth Ministry Programming* because it requires something more than a program; it requires the *WHY* to be a *movement*. By definition, a *program* is "a plan of action to accomplish a specified end."¹ Basically, it's a set of planned actions that take us to a given outcome. From a ministry perspective, this is not necessarily a bad thing. This is the puzzle piece part of a traditional program. However, a *movement* is "the progress of events, as in a narrative or drama."² The benefits of it being a *movement* is that it starts with opportunities and builds on the momentum through a relationship narrative.

Remember, ***students are the best equipped to reach students for Jesus*** when they understand that they are **UNIQUE**, here by **DESIGN** and not chance, and have a **CALLING**. If that is the **WHY**... then the **FRAME** is a ***Student Leadership Movement***. It's providing students opportunities to:

- Take ownership of their group
- Make decisions about the ministry
- Giving them opportunities to serve and volunteer
- Allowing them to lead in key roles

If I had to sum it up, it would be about creating a culture in which every student doesn't necessarily have a role or title, but rather, every student sees himself or herself as **UNIQUE**, **DESIGNED** and **CALLED**, not because they were told (i.e. ***program***) but because they want to ***influence*** (i.e. *movement*) their world in a practical way. This generation wants and longs for the opportunity to take hold of their world and leave a mark. Wouldn't it be great if that mark was for Jesus?

PAUSE: I know what you're probably thinking right now. In principle, you agree with me. You see the value in creating a system that is relationally connected and empowers students to take ownership. You maybe even believe in everything I've said so far... but we are creatures of habit, and ***Traditional Youth Ministry Programming*** has actually been around for decades. It

works most of the time, and it takes significantly less work than what you may be proposing as of now. But even if I wanted to implement this new framework, I can't throw out my **"traditional program... it's my job... it's what I'm expected to do."**

THE BYPRODUCT - Step #3

If you're willing, stick with me for one more step. See, once you have developed the **CIRCUIT BOARD** (*WHY*) and created a **FRAME** (*HOW*), you now have the perfect platform for your **PROGRAMS** (*BYPRODUCT*).

This is what I *LOVE* about this process. This outcome *looks* like a *traditional program*. It contains some of the same elements of youth ministry: Worship, Teaching / Sermons, Small Groups, Events, Outreach, Missions, Service Projects, and even Crowd Games, Icebreakers, Announcements, Offering, and Communion. But, there is a huge difference this time.

Underneath it all are those connections from the *Spiritual Circuit Board*. At its core is the belief that ***students are the best equipped to reach students for Jesus*** when they understand that they are **UNIQUE**, here by **DESIGN** and not chance, and have a **CALLING**. Now you can *plug-n-play* those *PROGRAMS*, but not frantically like in the traditional model. Rather, they are intentional tools for ministry. Any program can come and go as needed, but what drives/connects them all never changes. By connecting every element of youth ministry to a *Spiritual Circuit Board* and a *Student Leadership Movement*, you are empowering a generation to become active participants in youth ministry to take ownership of their faith.

WILL YOU JOIN?

We started this journey with a simple question: *why is youth group failing (i.e. the majority of kids never go to church once graduated)?* I don't think it's failing, but it's definitely changing. The **Traditional Youth Ministry Programming** just isn't working anymore because our world has change. For those groups that don't change accordingly, they see kids walk away after high school. They walk away because...

- They don't believe they are the best equipped
- They don't believe they are **UNIQUE**
- They don't believe they are **DESIGNED**
- They don't believe they are **CALLED**

They never experience the *heart-change* that sparks a *movement*. So, they wander around until someone else *sparks* a movement, or their fire dies out. But it doesn't have to! We can make the shift, and there are places, cities and youth ministries that are making the shift right now, and revival is coming to their groups.

As I said before, oftentimes pastors and leaders hear about this and freak out because they think I'm trying to turn their world upside-down. The reality is, I'm not. Instead, I'm trying to push them to go deeper, to create layers on which they can build vs. the random puzzle-of-the-week. It does take more work – I'm not going to lie about that. This is the harder path, but over time, as your movement develops, it does this amazing thing... it gains *momentum*. Youth ministry is changing, but it's far from dead... in fact, I think it's really just starting. Will you join the movement?