



Old Stuff and New Stuff

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The old paradigm for fellowship groups seems out of step. What is the next generation?

Good question. The answer is, It depends on what you mean by the old paradigm. If you mean a paradigm of food, games, some sort of lesson, and a devotional, that probably is out of step—particularly if it is one-size-fits-all.

So, what is the next step? There are several steps, actually. The next step is to develop a game plan (or master plan) for your youth ministry: Where is it you want to go? What are the results you want? How does your fellowship group fit into that plan? Once you know that, you have the outlines for the next step for fellowship groups.

Given a game plan, here are some potential next steps for developing your fellowship group.

- Keep the games, but develop them into something richer. Be sure that every game either helps build community through teamwork activities or serves as a transition into reflecting on the game in the light of Scripture and Christian faith. Walt Marcum's book *Go For It* is an excellent model for using games in this way.
- Use fellowship groups as an entry point for youth new to the church. Some churches emphasize fellowship, community building, and an introduction to the Bible and the faith. The fellowship group then

becomes a conduit for feeding people who are interested into Sunday school classes, Bible studies, mission trips, and other activities that help them learn and grow in the faith. The strength of this model is that it really does serve comers, those who are there for fun and/or who are new to the church. It can be a powerful model for attracting youth and moving them into a deeper maturity of faith. This model also has some potential weaknesses. One is that the adult leaders have to be continually intentional about inviting youth to another setting where they can learn more about the faith and grow in it. If they do not, then the whole model ends with fun on Sunday night. A second potential weakness is the assumption that youth have time to move into Sunday school, Bible study, and so forth. Youth are incredibly busy, and not all of them will be willing to take the time to add something besides the fellowship group to their schedule. A third potential weakness is related to the second: How does the fellowship group feed youth already in the church who are hungry to go deeper into the faith but who also want to be part of the fellowship group?

- Another possibility for a next step is a kind of buffet approach. You offer a variety of choices in your fellowship time. Some are common events that are aimed at building community and attracting youth to want to know more about the faith. The youth have choices for how they spend part of the evening: a four-week Bible study, a service project, or a time just for fun. Every four weeks, you lay out a new spread on your buffet and invite youth to choose what they will participate in during the next round. This approach provides for the needs of youth who want not only to be in the fellowship group but also to go deeper than the activities aimed at newcomers. It also invites newcomers to make choices about how they spend their time and if they want to learn more. The potential weakness is in the youth themselves. Will they actually spend the four weeks in the activity they selected? It *is* worth the risk.



How important is it that we know what the Millennial Generation is?

On a scale of one to ten, it is about an eight or a nine. Why? Because the Millennial Generation is completely different from Generation X, which means you will need to minister to them in different ways. The Millennial Generation includes those who were born between 1982 and 1999. Let's take a look at some of the characteristics of the Millennials.

- They are the largest generation in American history, with more people than even the Baby Boomers.
- They will be more racially and culturally diverse than previous generations. Fourteen million Millennials are children of immigrants.
- They have grown up with computers, video games, cell phones, and VCRs, so the world moves fast for them. They are used to sound bites and quick solutions to complicated problems.
- They spend time surfing the Web, so the world is larger (and, at the same time, smaller) for them. They do research for their school work at Harvard, the Library of Congress, and dozens of other sites on the Web.
- They want to make a difference in the world. They are what some researchers call a civic generation: committed to helping others and changing the world.
- They tend to be more homogenous in their natural groupings, which means that diversity and interracial and intercultural events will be harder to achieve.
- They will not automatically be more interested in spirituality. Their spirituality will tend to be a group spirituality, rather than a solitary one. This gives youth ministry—and the church in general—a key opportunity for teaching discipleship, the theology of community, the power of covenant.
- They want and need the church, but they need to be challenged by worship.
- They are interested in meaning, so they want real answers and not flip ones.
- Nearly twenty percent of Millennials in the United States live below the poverty line, and approximately 8.5 million are without health coverage. So, this generation has problems to solve.
- Ironically, Millennials also have a great deal of economic power, both in their own spending and in the way they influence family spending. This means that stewardship can become a key issue in working with Millennials.

So, what does all that mean for youth ministry? A key issue for Millennials is salvation: Is there anyone who cares enough to die for me? This will be a challenge for youth ministries that have tended to shy away from this kind of theological language. Millennials want to be where they can make a difference, such as mission trips and work camps. As youth ministries harness this energy, we also need to help youth reflect

on why they are doing what they do and relate home repairs for the poor to Christian faith. A minority among Millennials want to know a lot more about the Bible and faith.



What About Safe Sanctuaries?

In some ways, this may be the single most important question in this book. Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures are about protecting children and youth so that church (on-site or off-site) is a safe place for them to be. This means participating in the life of the church without fear of abuse, unwanted sexual advances, and so forth. Safe Sanctuaries is also about protecting adults who work with youth from unwarranted accusations. It is for the common good.

A Safe Sanctuaries program will include both *policy* and *procedure*. Policy is the structure in which the issues are spelled out. It answers the questions about who, what, and why. Procedures spell out how your church implements the policy. It answers the questions about when, where, and how. Your congregation should have both policies and procedures in place, in a written statement, so that everyone knows exactly what they are. In fact, if you are a United Methodist congregation, you may already be required to have a policy on file with the district superintendent. Annual conferences have statements of policy and procedure, as do camps and youth events at conference and national levels.

Safety measures include such things as doing background checks, having at least two unrelated adults in all groups, leaving doors open or having windows in doors, requiring that adults in supervisory roles be at least five years older than the youth. Regular training (on an annual basis) for youth workers is an important part of the system.

If your congregation does not have a Safe Sanctuaries policy in place, spearhead the development of one. The annual conference or district office has policies on file that you could use as a model. Also check out the book *Safe Sanctuaries for Youth* in “For Further Reading” (page 125).

Again, this may be the single most important question in the whole book. Because youth ministry is so incarnational, the way we treat youth is crucial to our ministry. And because youth ministry is so incarnational, youth leaders become more vulnerable and open to false accusations. Do everything in your power to protect both your youth and the adults who work with them. Be sure you have Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures in place, and be sure that the proper safety measures are followed in all groups, at all times.



What are gifts and graces for youth ministry?

What do we mean by gifts and graces? These are God-given attributes, personality traits, skills, and talents that equip people for youth ministry. Gifts and graces are given both to professional youth ministers and to lay volunteers. As Jesus, Paul, and James all said in different ways, God is no respecter of people, so gifts are given to all. In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that gifts are given for the sake of the church, not for the sake of the individual. So, gifts and graces are what God gives us—and what God expects us to use in ministry to others.

Having said that, what are some gifts and graces for youth ministry? One from Paul's lists is teaching. It is important that we teach youth the faith, both its content and what it means for our daily lives. It is important that we teach them in love, allowing them to grow and develop in God's good time. It is important that we teach them with honest openness, allowing them to form their own understanding of the Bible and theology, rather than imposing on them a preconceived agenda of what faith is. A person to whom God has given the gift of teaching is blessed with both gift and calling and is a priceless treasure for youth ministry.

Other gifts and graces include openness, the ability to listen without judging, patience, love, honesty, and compassion. Most of those are self-explanatory, but let me say a word or two about love. Love means caring about youth for who they are, as they are; being willing to accept youth without conditions; and caring enough to push youth to move beyond inappropriate behavior, to push them to become better than they are. The following is an example not related to youth ministry in the church: At the end of my junior year in high school, I had to turn in a topic for my senior paper. Being infatuated with baseball, I submitted Babe Ruth as my topic. The biology teacher, who also taught junior English and was sponsor for the yearbook (I went to a small high school), came to me and suggested that I was capable of doing a paper on a topic that was more significant and required more thought and reflection than a biography of an athlete. She pretty much pushed me to change my topic. I now understand that she was pushing me to become better than I was, challenging me to grow and develop. Love also means, at times, being tough with youth. It means allowing them to face and deal with the consequences of their own actions, but standing with them and supporting them as they do that. We do not solve their problems for them or take their punishment on ourselves, but we also do not turn our backs on them when they need us the most.



I feel driven to work with youth. Is that a call to ministry?

I would say yes, assuming that your drive comes from wanting to minister to youth, not to meet your own needs. I once knew a youth worker who felt a strong call to work with youth, but that was because she needed to relive her own adolescence. Her call was to meet her own needs, not the needs of youth. Until she worked through that need to relive her own youth, her ministry suffered.

With that caution, yes, your feelings of being driven are probably a genuine call. As many people have said, a call comes when our abilities to help intersect with the needs of the world. Do you have gifts and graces for youth ministry (see Question 98)? Do your gifts and graces fit with the needs of youth in your community and church? If you answer yes to those questions, then you are probably experiencing a genuine call.

Remember, not every call to ministry is a call to full-time, professional ministry. It may be a call to minister to youth through teaching a Sunday school class, working with a fellowship group, teaching and supervising carpentry skills in a work camp. Calls to ministry with youth are not limited by age. One of the most effective youth ministers I ever knew was an eighty-two-year-old woman who, in a medium-size church, made it her business to know all of the youth by name, to talk to them and ask them about what was going on in their lives, to send them birthday cards, and to encourage them whenever they participated in worship leadership. She was not on the official roster of youth ministers in that congregation, but she was an incredibly effective youth minister. Another great youth minister taught English in the high school. Her ministry was loving students, helping them grow in knowledge and responsibility and, incidentally, in faith. She showed the love of Christ by her every action and concern for youth. When asked about important influences on their life and faith, many youth at church named that teacher.