

6 Prophetic Voices

Throughout this “study” we have been examining congregational youth ministry across the country, particularly in mainline and evangelical Protestant settings. This has been an attempt to help us understand and construct the world of youth ministry in local congregations. As we conclude we will examine a number of “trends,” some of which we have spoken about earlier and others we have not discussed. In looking at these trends, we will also briefly address some areas of congregational youth ministries that seem lacking. We hope this discussion will challenge the church or you to help congregational youth ministry be more faithful than perhaps the current the situation in many congregations.

Each component of youth ministry or any ministry must meet the criterion of building up the kingdom of God. In scripture, the prophets applied this criterion to the endeavors and institutions of God’s people. Thus it is through prophetic eyes that we will take our final overview and with prophetic voices we will attempt to speak.

Computer Technology

According to the Barna Research Group of California, a growing number of Americans are using the Internet in seeking faith-based experiences, including 12% of teenagers. Activities such as reading devotional passages on line and submitting prayer requests were found to be of much greater interest to youth than to adults.¹

Antidotal information suggests that the use of the web for spiritual growth will continue to grow. The Upper Room (an ecumenical, but heavily United Methodist organization, which publishes devotional material such as *The Upper Room* and *Devo Zine* for teens) has recently created a web-based devotional magazine for young adults and teenagers called *MethodX*. Several students of mine have even created Sunday school classes on the web where those who have gone off to college can participate every week. The students are finding that other college students are joining the discussion who have had no relationship to the home church community.

We found that one of the main uses by churches of the computer was to run Sunday school programs and software. Some churches are also using computers to help tutor youth.

Some youth ministries post all activities online and expect their teens to use this method of gathering information rather than the traditional mail or phone lines. Even permission slips are posted on the web so they can be downloaded. A significant number of my students keep in touch with the youth of their congregation’s youth ministry via e-mail and specially designed chat rooms. One can only think this trend of using the web for spiritual growth and ministry will increase as more and more colleges require computers for their students and as even more youth gain immediate access to and familiarity with the technology.

Warehouse 242 is a new church development designed for the twenty-something crowd and has been called one of the best new Protestant congregations.³ It is trying to do much of its publicity and contact with its members via the Internet. In an Internet-based program such as this, the phones stay relatively quiet, yet does the building of community suffer? Time will tell.

There are some dangers with this technology, as Quentin J. Schultze has helpfully pointed out in his work *Winning Your Kids Back From The Media*.² Both the widespread use of technology and its dangers are here to stay, however. So the church will need to critique the use of the new media and to keep finding ways to communicate God's love through its use. If this is done, the potential for youth ministry is tremendous and the possibilities are very exciting.

Spirituality: Hindrance or Help in Ministry?

The current fixation on personal piety may be a cause for concern. Historically those who have focused solely on personal piety have lost the motivation to transform communities and to help build God's Kingdom as they concentrate on "transforming" themselves. This tunnel vision does not need to be the case, and personal piety can indeed lead to a strong social consciousness. However, I am a product of the church of the "turbulent sixties." During that time, my pastor was an Englishman who had captained a British ship during WWII. He was finishing an advance degree and would go on to become the President of Centenary College in Louisiana. He was an active and socially-focused man who introduced me to the concept found in Micah 6:8, that God requires us to do justice and to love kindness as well as to walk humbly with God. He took me to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach when I was in ninth grade. I came to a fuller and deeper understanding of the faith through the witness of my pastor and of Dr. King.

Under this pastor's tutelage, our church started a youth coffee house. We did home repair in the inner city and tutored "disadvantaged" youth and children. We marched with our brothers and sisters in the street for our nation to live out the true meaning of its own creedal documents. We did all of this because we understood that this was part of our Christian witness and what God was calling us to do. We saw these social ministries as a living out of the prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth..." But we met the most resistance in this type of ministry, not from non-Christians, but from Christians who claimed a deeper walk with God. These were Christians who claimed that they spent lots of time praying and growing in "sanctification." Obviously this experience has affected me and led to a suspicion of persons who would claim a greater spirituality than others, or those who focus solely on personal piety.

It is heartening that many of our fellow Christians involved in various spirituality movements have tried to avoid the trap of choosing either a life of contemplation or a life of active service to God. I am hopeful that this renewal of personal piety will be an active spirituality that engages God's creation in the world. I am also hopeful that those

who embrace spirituality will remember that God does not want us to withdraw into our own little cocoon, that it is simply not enough to focus on oneself and God without considering God's creation.

Certainly the new attention to spirituality in youth ministry has helped me to turn my attention once again on how I am growing in faith, or in the words of the founder of my tradition, how I am going on toward perfection. Consequently there is much to rejoice about in this renewed emphasis on personal piety, but **only if** those who practice it continue to remember that active service is a part of a "true" spirituality.

Mission/Work Camps and Service Learning

I am also heartened by the desire of young people to change the world for God and to help build God's kingdom. The tremendous increase in mission projects and service learning that is creeping even into the secular world does my activist heart good. Yet, I am worried that we have not done a very good job of teaching Christian young people why we are about this type of activity.

As I encounter young people who have undertaken home repair ministries and other forms of mission projects, I often ask them what they are learning. Too many times I hear, "well I'm going to study harder in school so I can have some money and don't have to live like them!" This may be a benefit of all this mission activity for our economy and for parents who want their young people to succeed in this culture, but it is not helping young people grow in their faith. The concept that what one is doing is an active form of spirituality is missing in many of these mission projects. Too many young people are engaging in service learning activity without any attempt to link it to their faith or to a basic understanding of sanctification. Additionally we seem to have left the cultural analysis piece for the sociology classroom in college. This needs to change if young people are going to experience the full benefits of an active and engaged missional life.

Critique of the Culture

One of the consistent challenges of youth ministry is, in my opinion, meeting young people where they are in the culture and then helping young people critique the culture in which they live as they grow in faith. Too often it seems we in youth ministry and perhaps even the church as a whole are willing to sell out to the culture in an attempt to be heard, or to win a hearing of the gospel message. This is not a new problem in youth ministry or even in Christianity, to have the radical nature and call of the gospel message watered down so people (young people in this case) will accept it and respond to it.

We saw only a few attempts of congregational youth ministries that were able to critique the larger culture in any substantial way, bringing about not just education but *change* (read conversion). Far too often we found youth leaders and congregations that seemingly accepted the American culture with all its consumption, consumerism, imperialism and American elitism. Christians in this country have been too quick to

accept the political and economic system of America as God given and scripturally based. These assumptions are simply not so!

In youth ministry we must be able to appropriate elements of contemporary culture without accommodating all its values. This is difficult to do because established religion regurgitates dominant societal values and therefore fails to engender commitment.⁴

Critique of the Church

The current church must change. For the most part with a few notable exceptions, the local church is not what God envisioned, Jesus desired, and the Holy Spirit seeks out. It is not a place where youth are welcomed or can be challenged and sustained to grow in their faith. Listen to this critique from a veteran youth worker:

The faith community has not yet figured out what to do with young people. For the past several months Wes Black, Chap Clark, Malan Nel, and I have wrestled with the question, how does God want youth ministry to relate to our churches in our postmodern world? Each answered the question differently; yet as we did so, we discovered a shared concern. There is a distinct possibility that after youth ministry has made all the adjustments required by theologians and sociologists, church leaders and parents, pastors and youth ministry trainers, the church would remain a foreign, even unsafe place for young people to gather. No place to go. Perhaps Chap said it best as he concluded his rejoinder: "By the way, did any of you notice that we all agreed the church must change, but we all felt very little power to make it happen? That God would cause the church to have the heart of Jesus for those that he came to seek and save!"⁵

Sonlife Ministries, a nondenominational training of youth ministers, started by Dann Spader, ran into this same problem. After the initial startup of training persons to work in youth ministry, he and his organization realized that they were training people to do healthy youth ministry only to see them enter unhealthy churches. His response was to take his organization in a new direction. He wrote, Growing a Healthy Church⁶ to help people understand what a healthy church was supposed to be. His seminars on this topic attracted thousands but not as many as those who were attracted to his youth ministry seminars. We, in the church, pretend everything is all right. So, if our youth do not attend or avoid worship, it is easier to blame the youth pastor or the congregation's youth ministry than to look at the entire church.

In a gathering of youth ministry professionals held by The Alban Institute in the Spring of 2000, Alban continued to ask what could they do in youth ministry? Over and over the response was, help pastors create healthy churches and healthy ministries. One cannot have a healthy youth ministry in an unhealthy church. Furthermore a problem in youth ministry usually signals an unhealthy church. Donald Miller, writing about what mainline Protestantism must do to remain an active part of the religious life of Americans states:

‘If the mainline churches are going to regain their leadership, they must do two things that the new paradigm churches already have mastered: first, they must give the ministry back to the people, which implies creating a much flatter organizational structure; and second, they must become vehicles for people to access the sacred in profound and life-changing ways.’⁷

As one who has visited churches for over the past two decades helping students in field education, as one who has lived in various regions of this country and attended a multitude of services from Pentecostal to Calvinistic to Wesleyan, as one who has visited over forty of the so called excellent protestant congregations,⁸ I must conclude that the church is *sick!* Not dead but sick. I believe the cure is to return to an understanding of what the church is supposed to be. I do not believe the cure is to adopt some new program passed down from an ecclesial structure no matter how needed or well intentioned. **Nor** is the cure simply getting a new pastor. The laity must become the church and take responsibility for the church, shaping the church, using God’s revelation as the core of the transformation, not the latest trend or fashion in the business world.

Ethnic Churches

America has become the most religiously and ethnically diverse country in the world and probably in human history.⁹ With the lifting of restrictive immigration laws in the 1960’s and with over nine million legal immigrants coming to this country in the last decade of this past century, this trend of America’s becoming more and more diverse is bound to continue. No longer can we think of one or two ethnic groups as representing the ethnicity of American religion or even of Christian traditions. The variety of ethnic representation in Christianity makes it nearly impossible to write about ethnic churches in a cohesive manner. And more study of ethnic congregations and youth ministry is definitely needed. *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*¹⁰ stands with a few others as the only works that have tackled youth ministry from an ethnic perspective.

This ethnicity is nothing new. Mark Noll, author of *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, makes the point that the Lutheran churches never were as active in American public or political life as they might have been given the numbers of Lutherans in this country because they were continually divided along ethnic and language issues. This division continued until restrictive immigration laws passed in the 1920s stopped the migration, thus weakening the influence of the home culture and language.¹¹

Ethnic churches that have a continuous and ongoing membership stream from the ‘home culture’ have tended to mirror the ‘home church.’ Once the ethnic church no longer has a large first-generation immigrant population, the church then begins to worship in English and adjust itself to the cultural issues in America. Youth always seem to be on the forefront of these issues in ethnic congregations. Often second-generation young people reject their parents’ culture for the new culture of America. Then it is up to the third generation to find a balance between the two.

Many of the para-denominational youth ministries that have continually bubbled up to the surface in the past one hundred years in youth ministry have a decidedly white flavor. Youth for Christ, Young Life, Campus Crusade, even the Scouting movement in the United States, all started out as almost exclusively white-focused youth ministry even if that was not the intent of the founders of the organizations. A number of them have since tried to reach out to the ethnic, non-European immigrant community but often with limited success.

There are, of course, those who would argue that Sunday morning church worship time needs to stop being “the most segregated hour in American society,” as Grant S. Shockley once proclaimed.¹² They might also argue that we need to stop thinking of “ethnic” youth ministry and just think of youth ministry. However, ethnicity, especially historical, remains one of the most powerful organizing principals of Christian churches in America. Additionally, at risk youth tend to be more highly represented in ethnic churches than in the general population. This concentration makes the ethnic church an effective place to begin ministry with at risk youth.

We did observe and visit several ethnic youth ministries, including African American; Asian American, and Hispanic American. (Anyone who is familiar with the vast differences within the Asian and Hispanic communities will find as I do these “labels” not very useful.) The most common feature of these youth ministries was the help given the young people in dealing with American culture and with their parent’s culture. Often the programmatic ministry of the congregation took on school and employment issues, as well as mediating between parents and young people. Still, as stated earlier, there is a tremendous lack of helpful material around successful youth ministries in ethnic settings, perhaps because the issues facing these youth are even more pronounced than those facing the youth of the majority culture.

We are convinced that specific ethnic communities, as well as subcultures within white America need specialized forms of youth ministries. For example, Appalachian communities do not accept the basic premise of capitalism that one moves to where the job are located. They may have as much need for specialized youth ministries as other ethnic communities.

Reaching Out To Troubled Youth

In the social reform movement of the latter 1800s and early 1900s, the church led the way in trying to improve society; whether it was involvement in juvenile justice, child labor laws, mandatory public schooling, temperance, or even the creation of orphanages and children’s homes. Over the years, direct church involvement and support has continued, but there has been an increasing personal disengagement. We found a lack of support and interest in reaching out to those some have been called “at-risk” or “troubled” youth. Certainly many adults seemed concerned when we talked about these young people. Yet most congregations were so focused on their “own youth” that they had no time or resources to commit to these other teens. Churches seem to have several responses to those we might call “troubled youth.”

Five Responses by the Church

One response of the church has been institutionalization. Certainly the church supports children's homes and institutions around the country with financial donations, trustee leadership, and even local church involvement, such as collecting gifts. But few congregations are actively involved in the ministry of working with troubled youth. The Church seems to think it pays the professionals to do this either through the juvenile justice system or children's homes, or whatever ministry seems to garner local church support. Lately that ministry seems to be church-sponsored wilderness camps.

In providing only financial support, the church has disengaged from direct ministry and mission with young people who are on the edge of society. Church members have retreated to the safety of their suburban homes where they stay focused on their own young people and hope they do not have a child who ends up in the court system. They resist attempts to bring "those troubled" youth into the congregation's youth ministry. And so most congregational youth ministries have become domesticated. There is no vision in local church youth ministry of reaching out beyond its own four walls unless it is to attract young people who are just like the young people presently in the congregation. Congregational youth ministry has simply become an in-house adventure with a church and its laity unwilling to pay the cost of true discipleship.

Another response has been for individual adults in churches to become foster parents (as my wife and I have) or to get involved in mentoring programs, such as Big Brother or Big Sisters. We discovered a church in Mississippi, which following the lead of its pastor, does over 75% of the foster care in that county. However, few church families seem willing to lead the culture in this way. In fact one church pastor responded in a recent private conversation, "I cannot get the trustees to let [needy youngsters] into the church building; there is no way I am bringing them into my home."

A third response has been the development of a drop-in center. Sometimes these centers are run by a not-for-profit cooperation that is supported by local congregations; at other times, the centers are run by local congregations. The drop-in center might be a place to get help for drug or pregnancy problems, or it might be just a teen center. Recently, some newer churches (those started after the 1970s) with younger congregations have been experimenting along this line. They are especially focusing on gathering places that serve all kinds of coffee (a redo of the old sixties coffee house concept). However these examples are few and far between and do not seem to last very long.

A fourth response from the church, while small and unusual, is worth noting. Some congregations have been working with the juvenile detention centers or children's homes in their community to integrate these youth with the "churched" youth. For the most part, this approach to youth ministry has not gone well. The church youth and the "on the edge" youth have not fared well in programmatic ministry when they are in the same groups. Issues around discipline, acceptable behavior, life goals and economic class have

proved difficult to overcome to create a cohesive group, never mind parents who have a theological? position that “one bad apple can spoil the bunch.”

Pete Ward in his book, *God at The Mall*,¹³ argues that we need two separate and distinct youth ministries - one for church youth and one for on the edge youth. While this may be the case, few congregations seem willing to enter into this type of missional activity, which is one of Mark Senter’s main criticism of congregational youth ministry.¹⁴

The fifth and largest response from the church and its laity has been apathy and ignorance. The church and its members have retreated to the comfort of their homes where they can watch the consequences of these “troubled” youth on the evening news and cry about the break down of society or the family BUT believe they have no responsibility in helping these youth develop faith and grow into mature adults.

The Relationship Between Religion and Juvenile Delinquency

Where will juvenile delinquents hear the prophetic word, and how might they encounter the church? There has been an ongoing debate, about whether religiosity deters delinquent conduct, and several large studies have arrived at different conclusions. Recent studies are beginning to converge on the conclusion (once again) that high religiosity (especially that which included strong group identification) does deter delinquent conduct.¹⁵ In other words the church could have a vital role to play in reclaiming our sons and daughters (to use the title of a recent book¹⁶) and assisting them to become true members of the community of faith and responsible, productive adults.

Most of us know that the situation with juvenile crime is not good, although it is currently improving and showing a lower crime rate than that of adults.¹⁷ The rate of adolescent drug use in the US is the highest of any country in the industrialized western world,¹⁸ and the rate of murders by youth between the ages of fourteen to seventeen have increased 165% between 1983 and 1993.¹⁹ Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Deputy Assistant US Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs, stated in 1994 that 7% of the juvenile delinquents commit 75% of the juvenile crimes.²⁰ There seems to be little evidence to contradict this finding today. Obviously then 93% of the juvenile delinquents commit 25% of the crimes. Kennedy Townsend seemed to be advocating locking up these the 7% of the youngsters who did most of the crime and never letting them out. But the Christian message is one of hope and the possibility of conversion. Who is going to share this message with these youth?

A limited study of the worst juvenile delinquents in Delaware City, Ohio (as identified by juvenile court personnel) found that none of them had religious backgrounds.²¹ While there are certainly other variables, including stability of parental relationships and socioeconomic status, that contribute to the juvenile delinquency pattern, the church was not present in the delinquent’s lives (except through grandparents) in any way whatsoever.

For many of these youth and certainly for the 7% who engage in 75% of the juvenile delinquent activity, there is no authentic prophetic voice! The church and others have walked away from the problem not for just one generation, but for several. After all 90% of the adults in state prisons are children of broken homes.²² Where is the hope? Who will engage these youth and become “Godbearers” to them? Most churches and ministries never see these youth until they are in adult prisons and most not even then. Is there hope for their future?

Scott Larson (Straight Ahead Ministries) and others like him have started relatively new ministries to the juvenile delinquent, but congregational churches need to rediscover ministry to the entire community of God’s people, not just to “their children.”

A Final Thought

Whether one is encouraged or disillusioned by the current state of youth ministry in the church in this country often depends upon one’s general outlook on life. Is the youth-ministry cup half empty or half full?

I am discouraged by the lack of interest the church seems to have in “at-risk youth.” I am discouraged by the seeming shallowness of many youth ministries and programs. I am discouraged by the people who think they know something about youth ministry” but do not.²³ I am discouraged by the people who think that there is no need for specialized forms of ministry of any type.²⁴ I am discouraged by the general uncritical acceptance of the American culture in most youth ministries. However, I am most discouraged by the lack of health many American churches. The ill health of American churches may be the most critical issue facing youth ministry one where the greatest number of people in youth ministry feel they have no control.

Yet, I am encouraged by the proliferation of material and interest in youth ministry. I am encouraged by the large number of employment opportunities available for people in youth ministry because it is a signal that many congregations know something is wrong and are actively trying to do something about it. I am encouraged by the ongoing youth-ministry networks that that been established over the past fifteen to twenty years. I am encouraged by the number of young people who are going to college wanting to make a difference and trying to ascertain whether God is calling them into some type of full-time vocation like youth ministry. I am encouraged by the creation of a new professional organization of people who teach youth ministry (Youth Ministry Educators Forum). I am encouraged by the legions of adult volunteers that allow any form of youth ministry to happen in local congregations. I am encouraged that God is still active and alive within us and within the Church calling forth a response from God’s people.

For all that you do in youth ministry, such as read this book, we give God and you our thanks, for with God’s help ya’ll make it possible. God Bless!

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Notes

¹From an article entitled ‘More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith experiences, May 21, 2001, from Barna Research Web page.

²InterVarsity Press, Downers’s Grove, Ill., 1994.

³See Excellent Protestant Congregations, Paul Wilkes, John Knox/Westminster, 2001

⁴p. 184, Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium, Donald E. Miller, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

⁵Four Views of Ministry and the Church, general editor, Mark H. Senter III, Zondervan, 2001, p.155.

⁶Growing a Healthy Church, Chicago, Ill. Moody Press, 1991.

⁷Miller. P. 187.

⁸Excellent Protestant Congregations, Paul Wilkes, John Knox Press, 2001.

⁹A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada, Eerdmans Publishing Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992 pp. 215-216 and 483-48.

¹⁰ Diana L. Eck, A New Religious America, Harper, 2001.

¹¹William Myers, Pilgrim Press ,New York, 1991.

¹²Working With Black Youth, ed. by Grant S. Shockley and Charles R. Foster, Abingdon, Nashville, Tenn., 1989.

¹³ See his Four Views of Youth Ministry, Zondervan, 2001.

¹⁴Hendrickson Publishers 1999.

¹⁵See Chadwick, Bruce A. and Brent L. Top, 1993, ‘Religiosity and Delinquency among LDS Adolescents,’ Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 32 (March 1993): 51-67; Peek, Charles W., Evans W. Curry and H. Paul Chalfant, 1985, ‘Religiosity and Delinquency over Time: Deviance Deterrence and Deviance Amplification,’ Social Science Quarterly, 66, #1, (March 1985): 120-131; and Stark, Rodney, 1996, ‘Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time,’ Sociology of Religion, 57 #2, (Summer 1996): 163-173.)

¹⁶Reclaiming our Prodigal Sons and Daughters, Scott Larson and Larry Brendtro, Beckman Hill, 1999.

¹⁷see Mike Males, Framing Youth, Common Courage Press, 1999

¹⁸Fuhrmann, Barbara Schneider, Adolescence, Adolescents Boston: Little, Brown, 1986, p. 432. and Santrock, John W., Adolescence, Dubuque, IA: Brown and Benchmark, 1996, p. 17 as well as the current National Study of Youth and Religion, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹Fox, James Allen, "Homicide Offending Patterns," Northeastern University, Boston, 1995.

²⁰Townsend, Kathleen Kennedy, "Prevent Juvenile Delinquency," Christian Social Action, (May 1994): 37

²¹Trimmer, Edward A., Interviews with 20 juvenile delinquents in Delaware, Ohio, unpublished.

²²Townsend, Kathleen Kennedy, "Prevent Juvenile Delinquency," Christian Social Action, (May 1994): 37

²³Such as the college that started a youth ministry degree program using an associate minister from a local church who had just graduated from seminary and never done youth ministry before. He taught the classes but was fired from the church in less than a year because he did not know how to function in or even conceive of youth ministry.

²⁴Specialized ministry such as church music, Christian camping, missions, Christian education, or youth ministry. To put it in the words of one college chaplain, "all one needs, to do effective ministry is a good liberal arts degree and to go to seminary."