

CHAPTER 1

Rethinking Youth Ministry

Jennifer, the pastor of Sunnydale Church, with Dave and Betsy, a couple from the church, arrives at the training seminar on youth ministry with several questions. Youth ministry has not been healthy in their congregation for many years. The congregation remembers a time, however, when youth were everywhere in the church, attracted by a very active youth group. But lately at Sunny-dale the youth group, when it meets, has only a few youth in attendance. Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave are hoping to get something going in youth ministry at their church. But they don't know where to start or how to get things going.

This book is an examination of youth ministry from a denominational and congregational perspective. I assume that the reader is interested in youth ministry within a congregational setting, although other organizations involved with youth—such as the Scouting movement, paradenominational groups, and nondenominational ministries (see chapter 8)—will be examined. I believe that youth ministry that operates from a congregational base is inherently different from youth ministry that operates outside the church. The core beliefs of a congregation, as well as denominational beliefs, will influence the development, leadership, program, and curriculum choices of the congregation's youth ministry. Thus I believe that one cannot overlook the history and structure of each congregation as it conceives and develops youth ministry to fit a particular understanding of ministry.

Most of the literature produced on youth ministry assumes a large, white, middle-class church structure and offers suggestions for developing an effective youth ministry within that privileged situation. This handbook is designed so that the steps outlined will work in urban churches or rural churches, small- or large-membership churches, and that each congregation will develop a youth ministry unique to its situation. I do not believe that there is a set formula for youth ministry that will "work" in every church setting. I do believe that by examining your church's unique ministry and by paying attention to the issues raised in this book, your church can develop an effective and *faithful* youth ministry.

Throughout the book, I have included some brief issues that Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave are struggling with. These questions are designed to help you think about the issues raised in this book and apply them to the youth ministry that engages your congregation. I hope to instill a spirit of continuous learning about youth ministry, because we are still discovering new ways to apply the gospel to the everyday lives of young people.

As you may be aware, youth ministry has been a key indicator of denominational decline (in both conservative and liberal groups) for more than twenty years. Many denominations have issued responses to the crisis. For example, The United Methodist Church has started a certification process in youth ministry, has revived national youth

rallies, and has once again separated the youth curriculum department from the adult curriculum department. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has found monies for additional staffing at the national level. Seminaries have begun offering a variety of youth ministry courses, and several of the more conservative seminaries and colleges are offering degrees in youth work. While it is gratifying to see these new denominational developments, there is still much work to be done.

Part of the problem in denominational youth ministry today is a lack of clarity over what is meant by the term *youth*. We have been functioning with differing understandings of youth for more than two decades. So Dave, Betsy, and Jennifer might start by thinking about who they mean when they say they want to have a better youth ministry in their congregation. Who are the youth in youth ministry? Does "youth" mean a fifth grader, a drop-out from high school, a seventeen-year-old college student, or a juvenile delinquent who is incarcerated?

Age Categories

Most denominations typically define youth by age. Sometime in the early 1940s, most of the mainline Protestant denominations began to define youth as those people from age twelve to twenty-four. In time this definition was altered to include only young people from age twelve to eighteen. A new category called "young adults" was created for young people from eighteen to twenty-four years of age. Most of our denominational churches today define youth as those who are age twelve to eighteen.

This definition has some problems, however. When the age limits were set half a century ago, most young men and women did not reach puberty until after age twelve. This is no longer the case. While statistics vary, the average age for females to start their menstrual cycle is now below age twelve. Other hormonal changes normally associated with puberty for females take place well before menstruation and well before age twelve. It is not unusual, especially in large urban hospitals, to find girls under the age of twelve giving birth.¹

Many of the groups doing research on the adolescent population (such as the Center for Early Adolescent Development and the Search Institute) are beginning to use age ten as the framework for a working definition of youth. This may be helpful, if we want to stay with age as the primary way we define youth.

I am not suggesting that we simply add all ten- and eleven-year-olds to the church's youth group. However, a specific ministry designed for this age group ought to be considered a part of the youth ministry. If we were to move in this direction, the youth ministry for those between the ages of ten and fourteen might be considerably different from the youth ministry for those over the age of sixteen.

There are also problems with the older end of the age definition. David Elkind has pointed out in his book *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* that American teenagers are maturing at an earlier and earlier age, only to find a society that wants them to wait longer and longer to assume full adult responsibilities, such as full-time, meaningful employment.² Indeed, some states discourage older teens (sixteen to eighteen) who want to drop out of school to get married and begin full-time employment by revoking their driver's licenses. The tremendous growth in both the numbers and the percentage of the adolescent population attending colleges and universities also attests to the issue that Elkind raises. A cynic might view college as a place where youth are told to wait another four years (perhaps five or six, depending on how quickly they do their college course work) before becoming adults and entering the work force full time.

While considering a working definition of youth, we need to remember that in many

developing countries the term *youth* is used to describe anyone up to age thirty-five. At some international gatherings of youth, the delegates from these developing countries are older than the chaperons of delegates from the United States.

Some teens graduate from high school before they turn eighteen. Into what category of ministry does a seventeen-year-old college freshman fit? Should she or he be a part of the youth group or the adult program? Perhaps it is time to alter our perception of youth. The Carnegie Foundation prefers to label youth as persons from age ten to twenty, thus reflecting the cultural and biological changes young people experience today.³

Grade-Level Categories

Another way to categorize youth is by their grade level in school. Indeed, some programs are designed for "high-school ministry" or "junior-high ministry." Many churches use this criterion for youth ministry by focusing on grade-level groupings both in Sunday school and in youth fellowship groups. Parachurch groups, such as Young Life, and other organizations limit their ministry to youth from a particular high school.

This use of school as a determining criterion for grouping may extend to other parts of the church community as well. For example, when does a youth become eligible for the "adult" choir? When does a youth receive separate stewardship mailings and visitations? Many times, the answer is only after graduation from high school or college.

The problem with using school or the education model as a way to define youth is not in whom the definition includes (those in school) but in whom this definition excludes (those not in school). Educational revisionists suggest that over one million teens in this country are not in school. Newspapers lament the high and many-times increasing drop-out rate, especially in urban areas. Many teens are seeking some alternative to the traditional schooling pattern, which is prevalent in middle-class neighborhoods. The incarceration rate of teens in either jails or hospital rehabilitation programs continues to grow. This means that an increasing number of teens are not in what one would normally think of as school; however, churches still should minister to/with/by them.

A more practical problem is presented by the graded school definition of youth. How are we to organize our youth fellowship groups when each community seems to organize its schools differently? When the junior-high concept was started in the early part of this century, it was conceived for educational reasons. Today school groupings are made less often for educational reasons and more often for reasons involving space and size. Based on available space and size of particular grades, each school system makes a determination about how to group students in specific buildings. Thus middle school (not junior high anymore) may include grades five, six, seven, eight, or nine in a variety of configurations. We can no longer assume, if we ever could, that the same understanding of graded education persists in middle schools across North America. Those patterns that do emerge in each community may be changed from year to year, depending on the numbers of students in a particular class. This has often created awkward or unnatural groupings for the programmatic aspects of youth ministry.

Additionally, organizing youth ministry by grade level has left our traditionally "college aged" young people out of the picture. While some churches have developed a specialized ministry to those young people who have just graduated from high school, the majority have not. One must assume benevolently that church leaders believe that their ministry to adults will minister to and with these persons. Many of us know that this has not happened.

Despite these problems, the graded school understanding of youth ministry is beneficial

for some congregations. For many youth, especially those from traditional middle-income or rural backgrounds, school and family are the dominant parts of their lives. The school can control from one third to one half of each teen's waking moments. Additionally, we as a society apparently think that all teens ought to be in high school. Thus the school can be a tremendous influence in the lives of teens and a very important part of youth ministry.

Most adult workers involved in youth ministry simply assume that school is a part of the life of youth. Thus books, programs, and conferences focus on high-school ministry or junior-high ministry. This pattern of youth ministry seems to "work" where the schooling patterns "work" in the American society. Where the schooling patterns are not working as well—namely, urban areas—in extreme rural areas and among minority groups, youth ministry that assumes school categories is not surprisingly performing poorly. The very way we understand and think about youth ministry in those areas is partly to blame for this "failure."

Church-Defined Categories

While school and age are the main categories used to define youth in our churches today, they are not the only factors. Unfortunately, some churches still consider youth only in terms of those on the rolls of the church or who happen to walk through the doors of the church. When these churches think about youth ministry, they do so only in terms of those whom the church family considers "theirs." These churches seem to have forgotten the universal aspect of ministry and God's saving grace.⁴ Churches are called to be involved in the world, to minister to the community that surrounds them, not only to those youth who walk through their church doors or who are born to someone who is a member and gives money to the church structure.

Developmental Categories

Barbara Fuhrmann in *Adolescence, Adolescents* suggests a working definition of *adolescence*:

the onset of puberty (at about 10 or 11 in girls, 12 or 13 in boys) to the assumption of full adult responsibilities: physical, social, legal and economic (usually about 21, but as early as eighteen and as late as the mid-twenties or even thirties). . . . Adolescence is "an open-ended period in which individuals character development defines the nature of the period" (Offer, 75, p. 180), with social, cultural, and historical factors exerting significant influence over the nature of that development.⁵

This definition makes sense from an academic standpoint, although it has many practical problems for the youth worker. Can we, for example, actually form a youth fellowship in terms of whether one has entered puberty? At this vulnerable age, too much stigma would result. However, as you examine your youth ministry you must begin struggling with the idea of who you are including or excluding in your program. We cannot expect our ministry to be effective or successful if we don't have an idea about the population to whom we want to minister.

The traditional age grouping of twelve to eighteen, which most church structures use, is not helpful, nor is the common definition of those in certain grade levels of school. Thus Betsy, Dave, and Jennifer should prefer to think of youth as beginning sometime around ten years old and ending when the youth are ready to accept full adult responsibilities, which may occur any time from about age sixteen to those leaving graduate schools in

their mid or late twenties.

The next step is to focus on those youth they want to target in the ministry of their congregation. As the church—or as Jennifer, Dave, and Betsy—talks about those youth, a working definition of youth will become apparent.

Ministry to/with/by Youth

Now that we have examined the defining characteristics of youth, we should ponder the kind of ministry that is appropriate to your congregation.

Youth ministry is, of course, in part ministry to youth. All ministry is, at times, ministry to people and communities who are in some sort of distress and need. Youth ministry is particularly designed for this purpose.

Effective youth ministry has usually meant that adults are "doing" the ministry to youth. However, youth ministry is much more than doing something to youth. It is also ministry with youth. It is God's people, in community, nurturing and helping each other and others.

Effective youth ministry includes helping, nurturing, and working with individuals and the youth community as they grow and mature in their faith. Ministry with youth suggests that they are involved in the process of ministry, including decision-making processes, leadership tasks, and other responsibilities.

Further, youth ministry is accomplished by youth. God's people, including youth, are involved with ministry in God's creation. Youth are no exception to this. They can minister to the church community, to the wider community, to the adults working with the youth ministry, and to youth themselves. Often, adults working with youth need to get out of the way and let them use the gifts God has given them. Youth, no less than adults, can be ministers in the New Testament sense of the word.

At various times, the youth ministry of any congregation will have ministries to, with, and by youth. An effective and faithful youth ministry will include all three approaches to ministry.⁶

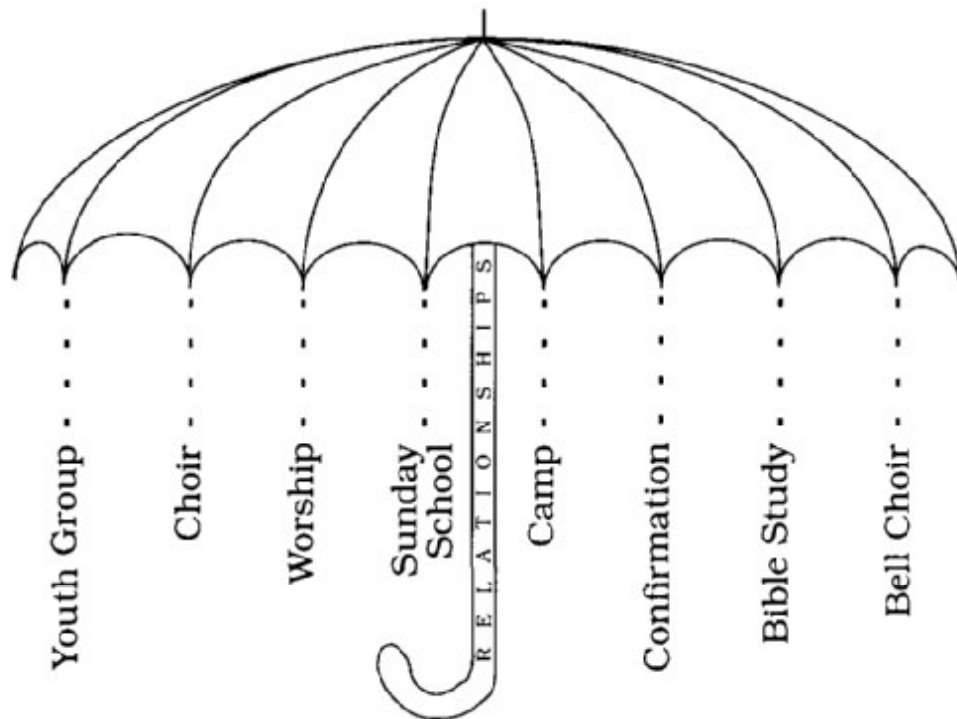
For our friends Dave, Betsy, and Jennifer, the idea of young people being in partnership with them in ministry is both exciting and terrifying. They are excited as they think about the possibilities of having the young people themselves help develop and carry out program and be involved in the ministry of the congregation. But it is terrifying to allow youth the opportunity to make decisions that may cause conflict or disagreement. It is threatening to think that they as adults are called to listen, really listen, to what teenagers may be saying about ministry. Further, if the members of the congregation's youth ministry have never been involved in a concept of ministry that includes them, they may rebel. It may be easier for the teenagers to allow adults to do all the work, all the planning, all the ministry than to get involved and help develop a ministry with and by youth.

Is youth ministry adult directed in your congregation? Or do young people and adults work side by side (ministry with youth)? Are there opportunities in your congregation's youth ministry for young people to be in ministry with the gifts that God has graced them with (ministry by youth)?

The Umbrella Concept

Youth ministry is not merely starting a youth fellowship or youth groups. Indeed, youth fellowships or youth groups are a particular form of youth ministry. Historically, fellowship

groups started around the 1880s in the United States and have continued in some form into the present.⁷ Many components might be involved in a youth ministry, including Sunday school classes, youth fellowship groups, choirs, athletic teams, Bible studies, and worship. Similarly, a church may have a very effective youth ministry and not have a particular part of youth ministry that another congregation has, such as a youth fellowship group. This book will discuss youth fellowship groups in some detail later, but will not be limited to an understanding of youth ministry as youth group. The image of an umbrella might be helpful.



As the drawing suggests, relationships help to hold the differing programs together in any congregation's youth ministry.⁸

The umbrella concept is an exciting idea for Dave, Betsy, and Jennifer. They have always thought that ministering to/with/by youth means having a youth fellowship group. Now they can see how Sunday school classes, confirmation, choir, and worship may all be considered youth ministry. Further, they understand that a youth group is just one part of the congregation's youth ministry. They will look at their congregation in a new light.

YOUTH MINISTRY AUDIT

- Youth fellowship groups (how many?)
- Youth Sunday school classes (how many?)
- Confirmation class

Choir . Youth-led worship
Bell choir
Athletic teams . Bible study . Summer camps . High adventure camps . Spiritual retreats . Scout troop . Support groups . Tutorial opportunities . Groups organized around talent or interest such as Book Club, Film Club . Youth newsletter
Youth musical

In what ways is your congregation already engaged in youth ministry? Take a moment to check the functions of youth ministry in your congregation.

Think About It Again

Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave now have some new ways of thinking about youth ministry as they head home from their first training session on youth ministry.

1. Who are the youth to be included in the youth ministry?
2. What are the differing ways of conceiving ministry to, with, and by youth?
3. How does their congregation's youth ministry already include these aspects of ministry, and how might they add new components to the congregation's youth ministry?
4. How does the umbrella concept help them to visualize all the differing aspects of youth ministry?

I hope that you are relieved to read that having great youth ministry does not necessarily mean that you have a great youth group. But do not give up hope that a great youth group can be an integral part of your youth ministry.