

RETHINKING YOUTH MINISTRY:

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4 YOUTH MINISTRY POSTS ENTITLED: *RETHINKING YOUTH MINISTRY*

POST #1 Three Options for Raising a Generation of Faith

POST #2 A New Role for Youth Ministry

POST #3 A Multi-Year Strategy for Change

POST #4 A Story about Faith-At-Home Youth Ministry

Part 1: 3 OPTIONS FOR RAISING A GENERATION OF FAITH

The popular opinion of modern youth ministry is divided. On one side, several authors and church leaders are dramatically demanding the death of youth ministry altogether. They are using phrases like, “youth ministry is a 50-year failed experiment”¹, or youth ministry is “a weed in the church”² that must be pulled immediately. On the opposite side, many churches have not stopped long enough to evaluate whether they still believe in traditional youth ministry. They routinely fill the youth ministry position merely because their history drives them toward a normative path. It is between these two divergent perspectives that we have found a brighter path for modern youth ministry.

I have been doing youth ministry at the same church for 9 years. My first 5 years were rooted in what I would call traditional youth ministry. I led an event-based, peer-focused, fun-seeking youth ministry with a strong element of biblical teaching. In my last 4 years our church made major shifts in the way we approach youth ministry. I’m not saying we have found all of the answers. We have not arrived at a perfect model for a new season of youth ministry, but my prayer

is that our journey away from the traditional model can help you find the first few steps toward the discovery of a brighter future for raising a young generation of faith.

I was asked to speak at a neighboring church about our transition toward a more family-focused youth ministry. After I had finished my third talk for this church I was approached by a woman who served me a loaded question.

She asked, "What do your teens think about your new-found focus on families within your youth ministry."

I replied, "Most of them are 'okay' with it, a couple of them don't like it at all, but several actually prefer it." The woman I was speaking with liked the "idea" of a more family-focused youth ministry, but she didn't think the teens would like it at all!

She objected by saying, "What if they don't like it and they don't come back?"

(I entered into full-blown analogy-mode)

I asked, "If you gathered a group of four-year-olds and gave them cookies and Kool-Aide each week and told them to invite their friends do you think they would come?"

"Yes, they would probably beat down your door," she replied.

I continued my line of questioning by asking, "If you suddenly stopped giving them sugar and explained that it isn't good for them, would they be upset?"

"Yes, you might have a full blown mutiny on your hands," she exclaimed!

I guessed at a possible reaction and asked, "We would probably see those kids stop coming over time huh?"

“Yep,” she quickly responded as if I had just made her point.

I inquired further, “What if those kids weren’t getting any food at home; would it be right to keep feeding them only candy each week?”

“Oh no, “the mother inside of me would not let that happen. We would have to get those kids a home-cooked-meal,” she explained as she beamed with pride.

I pushed her thoughts a bit further by asking, “They would love that for one day of the week, but what about the other days? What about for breakfast and lunch too? It seems like there is no way we could keep up with all that cooking, could we? If we are going to keep them fed we might even need to purchase a couple of snacks, too! What could we do?”

Overwhelmed by the thought of feeding a large group of children on a daily basis she paused briefly to explore my question. “If those kids weren’t getting fed at home I would call their parents!”

“And what would you say to them?” I asked, itching to make my point.

“You need to feed your kids at home! All we are giving them at church is sugar, and you can’t expect us to feed them every day of the week! We can give them a solid meal here and there, but you cannot expect us to be the only ones who feed them!” She stopped briefly for air and continued, “You can come to church and get food from the pantry, if you need to, but you need to feed them at home!”

I paused to see if she had just realized that her last outburst had made my point for a family-focused ministry. It finally “clicked” for her. She realized that we could give spiritual nourishment one or two days of the week, but the real spiritual nourishment had to come from home. She understood that many teens wouldn’t like the change, but the goal isn’t to make christianity

likable, it is to raise a mature generation of faith by providing enough spiritual nourishment for them to grow.

I explained to her that, "We have been raising several generations in youth ministry who have been fed spiritually on cookies and Kool-Aide one or two days a week. Even if youth ministry works hard to provide steak once a week, it still is not enough. Students are starving and, in some cases, are dying spiritually. If we are going to raise a generation of faith, we have two options. **Option one**, we can call home and convince moms and dads to regularly feed their teens spiritually at home. **Option two**, we can raise up around the teens a multi-generational community of faith (the church) that loves them, cares for them, and leads them to become life-long disciples of Christ." She thanked me for my thoughts and we parted ways.

SETTLING FOR OPTION 3

Later I began thinking about how most churches try to raise a generation of faith. Most churches are pursuing a third option . . . youth ministry. Youth ministry was never intended to be the primary way by which we raise a generation of faith. It was designed as a supplement for what happens at home. It should be at least third on the list of option. **If the church continues to rely solely on youth ministry, it will fail to raise a generation of faith.** Youth ministers are typically young and inexperienced and in extreme cases their job description is to spiritually feed a generation of young teens nearly on their own. Armed with a budget, a few volunteers, and a 4 year degree they are often asked to mentor the most vulnerable group in the church. This is not realistic, biblical, sustainable, nor is it working.

STATISTICS

I am by no means an alarmist. I do not think the sky is falling and everything will fall apart unless . . . (fill in the blank). However, if churches do not begin to wake up to the reality of the modern-day family, and to the limitations of youth ministry. We will see the continuance of a steep decline in young Christians who develop into life-long believers. Below are striking statistics about generations whose primary source of spiritual nourishment was provided by youth ministry.

“In fact, the most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings - 61% of today’s young adults - had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). Only one-fifth of twentysomethings (20%) have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences.”³ These percentages are among the most optimistic; others studies suggest between 60 to 90 percent of youth involved in church reject the Christian faith when they are young adults.⁴

“We discovered that in a typical week, fewer than 10 percent of parents who regularly attend church with their kids read the Bible together, pray together (other than at meal times) or participate in an act of service as a family unit. Even fewer families—1 out of every 20—have any type of worship experience together with their kids, other than while they are at church during a typical month.”⁵

After examining our church’s youth group retention rates I found that over 90% of our students whose families had some sort of faith-at-home routine were still faithful years later. While slightly over 30% of our students whose families did not have a faith-at-home routine remained faithful. This clearly outlined a new job responsibility for our youth ministry. If the job of the youth minister is to raise a mature believing generation of Christians, the answer was not found in event-based, peer-focused, fun-seeking youth ministry. The best way for youth ministry to retain a generation of faith was to make it more likely that families would pass down their own faith to their own children.

The next several posts will further outline: (1) a new role for youth ministry including a biblical theology that supports this new perspective, (2) A tested multi-year strategy to implement a more family-focused youth ministry.,(3) Tools that will help families improve their spiritual family environment, (4) as well as two stories from our experience that illustrate the success of this new perspective.

¹. Alex Murashko, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/church-services-separated-by-age-un-biblical-say-former-youth-pastors-52964/>, 2011.

² Scott Brown, *A Weed in the Church*, (Quotation above is a reference to the title)

³ Barna Group, "Most Twentysomthings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," <http://www.vama.org/barna-update/article/16-teennext-gen/147-most-twenty-somthings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years> (accessed January, 2012)

⁴ Mark Holmen, *Church + Home* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2010), 28

⁵ George Barna, *Transforming Spiritual Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003), 78

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Part 2: A NEW ROLE FOR YOUTH MINISTERS

It isn't just statistics about young people leaving the church that cause alarm. What is equally concerning is the lack of Christian maturity that exists within young Christians who remain in the church. Ephesians 4 begins to paint a picture of what mature Christian believers look like. How do today's young believers measure up to the standard of maturity we read about in scripture?

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Today's young adults are a generation raised primarily by school, sports programs, internet, T. V. and video games. They may have had only a few spiritual moments with their families and with youth groups throughout their lives. Even a cursory reading of Ephesians 4:11-16 shows there is a great distance that exists between God's expectation of the maturity of adult christians, and the

realized maturity of young adult Christians today. Many young adults today are not mature contributing members to the body of Christ. Many young Christians even in their early twenties are a decade away from having an understanding of God, a life that seeks the full measure of the fullness of Christ, convictions that are wise to the deceptive ways of the world, and a realization that the body of Christ (the church) is depending on them. Ephesians 4 not only paints a picture of Christian maturity, it also portrays church and its role in contributing toward maturing believers. God has gifted his people as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Younger generations cannot adequately grow unless they connect with the spiritual influence of the entire church. Ephesians 4 clearly shows how “option two,” the church, is God’s plan for growing a generation of faith. God’s plan for “option one,” goes back much further into the biblical narrative.

Deut. 6:4-9

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.

For thousands of years faith in God has been primarily passed down in a singular fashion . . . through family. It was passed from father to son, mother to daughter, grandparents to grandchildren, uncles to nieces and nephews. Faith was advanced through family. Even within ancient Hebrew culture followers were not primarily made at the temple, synagogues, or at the hands of any other organization. Families banded together as a unit to instruct and model what was important, namely, God. It was their life, not merely a ritual or weekly gathering at the synagogue.

When one considers Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Ephesians 4:11-16 together, a comprehensive plan for faith development emerges. If we view Ephesians 4 through the lens of Deuteronomy 6 we see faith development through the everyday faith practices of the family. Godly maturity happens first at home! When we view Deuteronomy 6 through the lens of Ephesians 4 we see how

the church equips families and includes them in a larger community of faith that shares a unity in thinking, direction, and support. Faith in the home is critical to the development of young believers. Young Christians today will rarely attain maturity without the daily faith practices of their family. Likewise, Christian families and their children will not attain maturity without the influence of the entire church in their lives.

TODAY'S SAD REALITY FOR FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Most Christian families do not have a Deuteronomy 6 environment at home. In many cases, Christian families cannot imagine what a Deuteronomy 6 life would look like in their home. They see it as unrealistic within today's busy culture. Families often respond with blank stares when asked how they are leading their children toward the picture of maturity found in Ephesians 4. Many parents have taken a more casual approach to faith development. This casual approach looks something like bringing children to church once a week, talking about faith if it ever comes up; and if the family gets really serious, enrolling them in a Christian school. A casual approach to faith development may have worked in years past, but it is not working in this culture. This culture is relentlessly promoting its lifestyle, and a casual plug for a different way of life will be too small to be noticed among the barrage of distorted thinking that is entering the lives of children and teens.

In addition, most churches don't know how to consistently involve the entire church in the faith development of children and teens. Churches have been content to relieve the whole body of Christ from the maturing process of young believers by placing them in vibrant children's or youth ministry programs. It seems like a good idea to hire a professional to raise young Christians in their faith, but as a result, most church members have relinquished their influence in the lives of students. Children are missing the influence of a body of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to shape them and develop their own spiritual gifts.

All hope is not lost. As it stands now, youth ministry, "option three," is uniquely positioned to lead families and the church to rediscover "option one" and "option two" as the primary methods to grow a generation of faith. This seems a little unusual at first. Youth ministry is, in many

cases, the only group that has enough influence to connect teens, families, and the church together in spiritual relationships.

1. The youth ministry has enough influence to help the teens see that faith discussions with their parents are important. Since teens trust the success of the youth ministry, it is much easier for them to listen to a youth minister/volunteer who says that talking to their parents about faith is important and is something that God expected of them.

2. The youth ministry has influence with parents, because of its relationship with the teens. Before this transition, I had never realized the inherent trust that parents placed in a good youth ministry. They trust the youth ministers to teach, and lead their children on trips, it isn't that far of a stretch to instruct parents in how to teach their children about faith. Most mature youth ministries have enough respect to help families create a spiritual environment at home. Don't misunderstand; most youth ministries will quickly find themselves over their heads if they try to tell parents how to raise their children. However, youth ministries are experts at creating environments for teens to listen to biblical messages.

3. Youth ministry also has a strong enough voice with the church to communicate what is expected of the church as a whole to contribute toward the lives of teens. Teens are often separated for years into age-segregated programs. Youth ministry can be a bridge connecting teens to the larger community of faith that exists in the church.

As a result of this approach, our youth ministry found itself in a new role to coach parents to disciple their teens at home, to leverage the relationship the minister had with teens to accept several potentially awkward faith moments with their parents, and to challenge the church to get involved in raising the next generation in faith. A youth ministry apart from family cannot be effective. A youth ministry isolated from the church as a whole cannot be effective. Don't get me wrong. All of the fun and games don't have to disappear in order for a youth ministry to work, but it should be clear that youth ministry has a much greater challenge ahead of it than making the next calendar of events.

RETHINKING YOUTH MINISTRY

Part #3 A MULTI-YEAR STRATEGY

The glory days of event-driven, program-focused youth ministry are over. Sad? Have a small funeral service if you wish; However, before you bury your beach-balls, youth ministry game books, and your calendar of events realize this change is going to take time and it doesn't require an immediate purge of everything that has gone before. The number one way for a youth minister to lose their job is to try and make the youth ministry a family ministry overnight. Youth ministers are notorious for getting excited about something, but not thinking things through. Often they will take ideas that others have processed through for years and steal their conclusions in seconds. I believe that everyone must mentally process all of these changes and recognize it is a multi-year strategy in order to shift towards more family-focused model for youth ministry.

The purpose of this multi-year strategy is two-fold. (1) The church or youth ministry must CHANGE the expectation of parents to accept responsibility for the faith development of their own children and teens. Parents will not magically take on the role as the primary disciplers of their children if the youth ministry disappears. The church and youth ministry must slowly and patiently assist in this transition. (2) The church must CHANGE to embrace their role to become a community of faith that takes responsibility for a portion of the faith development of teens and children rather than assuming the youth ministry will handle it.

In this article, we will focus on how to change the routine of parents to take responsibility for the faith development of their children and teens. Here lies the tension: If parents continue to feel like the youth ministry/children's ministry will take responsibility for the faith of their children, then they will not change their routine at home. However, if youth ministry vanished out of the lives of unchurched teens, many current students will struggle to find any connection to Christianity. Those who demand the immediate deletion of all things "youth ministry" don't understand the culture of abandonment that exists within the lives of teens. The teenage world doesn't need another available adult eliminated from their lives.

It is actually not difficult to convince families and churches that the way they have been passing down faith isn't working. It has actually been refreshing to encounter so many families who freely admit that they must change the way their family approaches faith. The most challenging part is for families to TAKE ACTION to change their routine. Typically when a church wants to address an issue it will plan a seminar, lectureship, event, or sermon series to address it. These seminars are great in order to raise awareness to an issue, but don't help much in the process of ushering people toward genuine change.

It isn't enough to simply raise awareness that parents need to intentionally pass down their faith. It isn't enough for parents to simply understand that the youth ministry isn't the primary method for the faith development of their children. Their awareness must lead them to action. If youth ministry is serious about equipping families to change the way they pass down faith, they need to consider a unique way to spark the type of change that is necessary. When people are faced with the option to change, they can generally be placed in several different stages.

The following information is an adaptation of a well-researched model of change. The Trans-theoretical Model of Behavior Change¹ includes five major stages. In order to help families take the action required to pass down faith, it is necessary to understand this process of change and for churches and youth ministries to work within each step.

5 STAGES TO CHANGE

Each family will go through each of these stages as they take more responsibility for the faith development of their children and teens. Several families will be motivated and will quickly implement changes into their daily routine that reflect their commitment to pass down faith. These families need very little to get started. Others need more time to change, and the church will need a multi-year strategy to patiently walk parents through these different stages.

Stage 1: Pre-contemplation

Stage 2: Contemplation

Stage 3: Preparation

Stage 4: Action

Stage 5: Maintenance

THESE ARE THE 4 ROLES FOR YOUTH MINISTERS/CHURCHES TO WALK PARENTS THROUGH THESE STAGES

Stage 1: AWARENESS: Raise awareness through education & information.

Stage 2: SELF-REFLECT: Help families self-reflect through discussion groups and self-evaluation.

Stage 3: PLAN: Assist families in developing a plan for creating a healthy spiritual environment.

Stage 4: COACH: Equip, remind, listen, and encourage families to continue faith activities in their homes.

YEAR #1 RAISE AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATE

In the pre-contemplation stage parents will need to learn more about the importance and benefits of passing down faith to their children in an intentional manner and begin to recognize how their current approach may be insufficient. Raising awareness about the problem and the solution is very important here and a gentle influence is key. These parents should not be pushed to make big changes in their regular routine, but to simply become more aware of the the problem, and how a better approach about how faith-at-home will impact their children in the long-term. If a parent in this stage feels pushed to change before they are ready, they are likely to become defensive and begin avoiding faith-at-home discussions or activities. Leaders will be more effective with parents in this stage if they listen empathically and try to understand where the parent is coming from or what they have already attempted in their families. Once the parent accepts that intentionally passing down faith is important for their family and feel some fear that doing nothing is worse than remaining the same, they will move on to the next stage.

Helping parents from the pre-contemplation stage to the contemplation stage is one of the few stages that can be done in large groups. Increasing awareness through education is one of the best ways to get parents between the pre-contemplation stage and the contemplation stage.

YEAR #1 WHAT THE CHURCH/YOUTH MINISTRY SHOULD DO

1. HOST A SEMINAR: Having a sermon series to communicate the problem, the solution, and the expectations of families is a great place to start.
2. WRITE IT DOWN: Provide something written to communicate the problem, the solution, and a brief description of expectations.

3. DISCUSSION GROUPS: Start discussion groups to get parents talking about the change they must make within their homes.

AWARENESS THROUGH EDUCATION: ONE-ON-ONE

One must also realize that not everyone will move from pre-contemplation to contemplation via group education. It will be helpful for the youth minister to follow up with families to identify those who have not begun to consider making this mental shift. Not everyone will be familiar with faith-at-home because there are always families absent on a Sunday for a seminar, or during a class. Getting coffee, lunch, or dinner, with families who haven't begun actively thinking about making changes is a great way to help in this process. I have found if a minister asks to get coffee or a meal, that family begins to think about what the minister wants to talk about with them. It is a little like being called into the principal's office. Many times just asking to meet starts the contemplation stage. During these conversations with families, ask how their family is doing and listen for about 15 minutes to 30 minutes while asking clarifying questions to understand where they are coming from. This will help build rapport and trust. They are more likely to accept a different point of view from someone who truly understands their situation. Youth ministers are there to serve families and to help in whatever way they can. Many times families will become apologetic if they haven't begun faith-at-home activities. I generally express that it is normal for parents of teens to struggle to do faith-activities in their homes. I will talk briefly about its importance and generally let them reflect upon the conversation. Conversations like this are effective in helping those who have not yet begun thinking about doing faith-at-home. The goal of conversations like this is not to get families to do faith activities immediately, although, it would be great if they did. This conversation is just to get them to begin thinking about doing faith-at-home and considering making the change that is necessary in their family.

Our church introduced these faith-at-home principles to our entire congregation. This is important because the younger the family the more receptive they are. After 4 years we are just starting to graduate families into our youth group who are used to doing faith things with their parents. After 1 year about 60 percent of families of children infant- kindergarten had been doing faith activities regularly. 40-50 % of families who had 1st graders to 5th graders had been participating in faith activities regularly. Only 26% of youth group parents were doing faith activities on a regular basis. Many had not yet begun.

IMPARTING FAITH

Imparting faith is a non-profit company that we started in the beginning of 2012. We saw a need to provide churches with the resources to guide their families through the stages of change. Imparting faith has produced several resources: a 50 page book for communicating faith-at-home expectations, a 3 lesson seminar (available on DVD or to host one live at your church), a discussion groups guide, a book that helps families evaluate and plan to create a spiritual environment at home, and a DVD of families describing their experience with faith-at-home. You can find these resources at impartfaith.com

No matter who does the seminar or what resources you use, follow up is important to get families to the next stages of change. Once parents know what faith-at-home is, and begin thinking about it within their family context, then they are ready for the contemplation stage.

YEAR# 2 GETTING FAMILIES TO SELF-REFLECT AND PLAN

STAGE 3 CONTEMPLATION

In the contemplation stage, parents recognize passing down faith to their children is important; however, they may not feel confident in their ability or they see many obstacles in their way. They may doubt that they can do a better job than the church leaders and teachers. They need to be provided with a clear vision of what their family can look like if they begin imparting faith with more intentionality. They may need to evaluate their own faith and commitment to living a Christ-filled life. They need to see how overcoming their initial obstacles or worries about this process can provide a more meaningful family life and ensure the future faithfulness of their children. Furthermore, parents also need to learn more from people who have already begun intentionally passing down faith. Parents need to know that other families have made significant changes amidst challenges and have found faith-at-home to their children a rewarding endeavor that is not as impossible as it may seem.

SELF-REFLECTION THROUGH EVALUATION

The youth ministry's goals within the contemplation stage is to help parents consider becoming more active with faith in the home by evaluating how they currently pass down faith. The youth minister should help families slow down and think about the state of their family. Families must accurately see the way they currently interact so they can see how it affects their family's spiritu-

al life. Once they understand the link between the way their family currently passes down faith and the faith development of their teens they can begin to reconsider their family routine.

YEAR #2 WHAT THE CHURCH/YOUTH MINISTRY SHOULD DO

1. **HAVE ANOTHER SERMON SERIES/SEMINAR:** Remind parents and the church of the important of faith-at-home.
2. **DISCUSSION GROUPS:** Host a second round of discussion groups for small grouping of parents to talk about successes and failures in their attempts to pass down their faith in their family.
3. **SIMULATION GROUPS:** Provide a time for a small group of families to do a faith activity as family at church. It allows families to do a faith activity as a family in an environment where they are used to talking about God. It allows some families to get over the discomfort of having their first faith activity as a family at home. (some will not have started their first faith activity even after a year)
4. **FAMILY INVENTORY:** Provide a inventory to your families for them to evaluate how they are doing in creating a spiritual environment conducive for growth in their family. Imparting Faith has created one called E4 Families (E4 stands for Ephesians 4). It is a family inventory that serves as a starting point for families to understand the strengths and weaknesses in their current faith-at-home approach. E4 Families allows the youth minister and family to talk about things in a positive way. It avoids a negative tone for these conversations between young ministers and parents. The E4 inventory also leads families into planning phase for their faith routines. Within the E4 inventory the youth minister has the chance to help families evaluate and troubleshoot what they are doing as well as make future plans about what they should do

If your families are offering significant resistance to doing faith within their homes it may be wise to implement E4 Families or other inventories in year 3 instead of year two. It essential that families get to the preparation stage .

YEAR #3 COACHING FAMILIES TO ACT, AND PULLING BACK THE YOUTH MINISTRY

In the context of faith-at-home action stage, parents have begun intentionally passing down their faith. They need to remain committed to their new mindset and routine as they combat the impulse to stop trying or become casual and/or idle. People in this stage need to learn more techniques for keeping up their intentionality and purpose in imparting faith. Seeing positive benefits in their family will help them keep their commitment to faith-at-home.

In the action stage the youth minister will become a coach to help families troubleshoot through the problems they may have within their home. The youth minister needs to begin to think about what families need from them in a coaching role to continue. There are many things that families may face that will discourage them from continuing faith-at-home. There is no one-size fits all manual for their family, that is why a youth minister is there to guide them through the various challenges that they may face, especially during the early months of the action stage.

Most families need someone to listen to them and encourage them. Listening is one of the most important things a youth minister can do during this stage. It allows one to slow down, and without another agenda, simply understand where someone is coming from. Most of the time ministers aren't good at this. Many times one's first inclination is to step in and solve problems when a family may just want someone to listen to how they feel. Failing to listen frustrates those who are being helped. Families also need encouragement to continue with this process. They need someone to tell them what a great job they are doing with the things that they have been doing well. It is better to avoid pointing out all of the things they may not be doing well, if it is clear that they need encouragement.

PULLING BACK

Once many of the parents understand their responsibility to pass down their faith, every youth ministry must make it unmistakably clear is that **the youth ministry will not be taking over the parents responsibility to pass down faith.** Even if parents know the truth about Deuteronomy 6, many parents will not take this responsibility upon themselves until the youth ministry gives it back to them. The youth ministry must empower them and inspire them about the opportunity God built into parenthood and how rewarding faith in the home can be. The student ministry can no longer enable parents to shirk their faith responsibility, but it must help them take ownership of it. It can be hard for some youth ministers to let go and let families do what God intended for them to do. Families do not need to be babied once they get past the early part of the action

stage. If the responsibility to pass down faith is going to rest on the parents shoulders, the youth minister at this point needs to let go and leave the parents to experience their own successes and their own failures.

This leads many to ask what is the youth minister to do after families take ownership of their responsibility to pass down their faith?

(1) Families never stop needing coaching to pass down their faith. There are new families that move in, and family difficulties that can easily derail good intentions. There is always room for the youth minister to support and coach families. (2) Create a youth ministry environment that has a direct parent involvement, but room for teens to have their own time. Our youth ministry has a weekly parents and teens class on Sunday morning. We have been doing it for over a year now and it is going great! Parents hear the announcements, the lessons, the comments, and are given faith-at-home ideas that correlate to the lesson. The teens still have a weekly time apart from their parents on Wednesday nights and many events that are teen-only. We do have family events that further support the idea of faith being a family affair. The youth minister widens his circle of influence to become the go-to minister for teens, parents, and sometimes younger siblings of the families who are a part of the youth ministry. (3) The youth minister must become or recruit faith mentor(s) for those students whose parents have a faith-at-home inability. Parents with a faith-at-home inability include those who struggle with their own faith, or have substance abuse, psychological issues, or are contributing to an abusive environment in their home. If the youth minister has created an environment where parents are a regular part of the youth ministry routine he will have a much large pool of quality mentors to choose from. (4) On top of these 3 significant responsibilities the minister will still be teaching classes, organizing events, and outreach opportunities.

COACHING IN THE MAINTENANCE STAGE

In the maintenance stage parents need to be aware that consistency is the key in passing down faith. It is recommended that parents continue to seek support from other families who have been pursuing the same change. It will be important that they share experiences and ideas with each other in order to renew their commitment and feel encouraged to continue. If a parent finds themselves falling back on their commitment to passing down faith, becomes less involved in

their children's lives, encounters personal faith challenges, or simply feels too busy to intentionally impart faith, they need to seek assistance from their church family and church leaders.

If families are going to successfully navigate through the stages of change, it is during the maintenance stage that the church and the youth ministry must take the training wheels off and allow families to discover a routine on their own. During the maintenance stage the youth minister needs to check-in every few months to see how it is going. The greatest tool a faith-at-home youth ministry has during this stage is educational reminders. It is helpful for the youth minister to continue to send articles or ideas to families within the maintenance stage to keep faith-at-home from feeling stale. Tools that educate or motivate parents are ways to remind and reshape the way they do faith-at-home on a consistent basis. There are plenty of articles on faith-at-home that are on the web that are easy to share. If the church is open to having yearly campaigns, this can be a great way to keep families going with faith-at-home. Families still need to be supported and encouraged, but they require much less time and energy than families who are in the early stages of this transition.

It is within these 5 stages of change that a clear path emerges for a shift between a teen-focused ministry to a faith-at-home focused ministry. This gives youth ministers a concrete plan of action for each family within their group. Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for youth ministry regarding working with families. The families in each student ministry are different. Some student ministries work with an abundance of healthy families, some struggle to find one family that is healthy. Most youth ministries, however, see families with a combination of unbelievable strengths and glaring weaknesses coexisting together. The youth ministry that can support the family and the church at the same time is a youth ministry that will contribute toward making mature disciples.

¹The Trans-theoretical Model Behavior of Change is an well known psychological model. General information can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transtheoretical_model, accessed March 2014.

RETHINKING YOUTH MINISTRY

Part #4 A STORY ABOUT FAITH-AT-HOME YOUTH MINISTRY

In the last 3 posts I have written about: (1) the state of youth ministry and the family, (2) a philosophy of ministry, (3) a theology of youth ministry, (4) and the nuts and bolts of a multi-year strategy. In this last post I'd like to tell two stories that highlight the difference between traditional youth ministry and what I would call "faith-at-home youth ministry."

I had been doing ministry for 5 years when I had my first "youth ministry is broken" epiphany. I had been doing what I had considered my best ministry, but the walls of traditional youth ministry began to crumble. One student's fall from faith caused a painful rupture in my belief in traditional youth ministry. This student had a poor family life and was someone who I had considered at-risk for losing their faith in God. As the youth minister, I had become a replacement parent to this student in many ways. I would regularly be called for advice, counseling, support, and biblical perspectives on life. This teen desperately needed stable adults because of difficult relationships within her family. I had become the proud adopted parent of a 6th grader. I had watched and guided this student from a young student into a junior in high school along each arduous step. She was a mainstay in our youth ministry. She was present for almost every event and for nearly every class and worship service. However, in what seemed like an instant this student's commitment to God and church vanished. This student chose to disconnect from church altogether. This teen rejected youth group, Christian peer influence, my influence, and the influence of almost every caring adult at church. There was no warning nor any explanation of her departure from faith. There was nothing I nor anyone else at church could say or do about it. We were cut off. This teen had become involved in a sexual relationship at school and couldn't face me or others at church. It was at that moment that I realized how quickly a youth minister, youth group, and a church could be sidelined at the whim of any teenager. I spoke to the parents of this teen. They were unwilling and unmotivated to help their teens see God or their faith differently. They were unwilling to have a conversation challenging her choices and decisions to walk away from church and from God. They wouldn't even entertain the thought of challenging her sexual relationship that had many implications for her and for their family. For years I had been working with this student growing her faith, and her parents had been undoing much of the

growth over her 5 years. Somehow I failed to see how this was a time-bomb waiting to lay waste to the years of youth ministry support.

I foolishly overestimated my influence and the influence of the youth group, and vastly underestimated the influence of her parents. Why was I surprised that her parents wouldn't help her back onto the right path? They considered themselves "Christians," however, this student's Mom was emotionally distant from anything spiritual, and Dad had strained relationships with everyone in the family. Mom didn't want to talk about faith with her children, and Dad didn't know how. How could I expect the student to become a genuine disciple if her parents weren't genuine disciples themselves? I had assumed that the best ministry practice was to leave the chaos of this student's home-life untouched, while I transformed her spiritual life apart from her home. This is the normal practice of traditional youth ministry. The phrase, "Disciple the teens, despite the family," is an unspoken truth embedded into bedrock of traditional youth ministry. The more I processed this student's past the more I realized that traditional youth ministry was broken.

If this student's story was an isolated incident, I would carry the scars of her story, but would continue ministry as normal. I know that every minister has regrets and lessons that they have learned. Yet this student's story isn't isolated. Every youth minister I have talked to has a story just like mine. The names were different, the family make-up was varied, but the endings of these stories were all the same. The students from Godless families, who the youth ministry thought would be glaring examples of what their ministry accomplishes, had instead turned into glaring examples of the limitations and failure of traditional youth ministry.

It took me the better part of three years to make what seemed like minuscule changes within our youth ministry. Yet the moment when I realized how far we had journeyed came in a remarkably similar situation to the story of the student told above.

We had another student in our youth ministry who had a difficult home life. Her Mom was spiritually and emotionally distant and her Dad had a strained relationships with her and her siblings. Yet within this family context our new plan for ministry began to increase the likelihood that this student would remain in faith. I knew I couldn't fix all of the family dynamics. The reality was

by the time our church knew about the family problems, talks of divorce had already begun in the home. This student's mom wouldn't meet with me, but her Dad was motivated to help the faith of his children. He didn't know how to talk to them about faith or where to start. He had been shut out of many of the details of his daughter's life because of prior conversations that had escalated into heated yelling matches. He hadn't given up. I met with him for a few hours and talked about the dynamics of their situation at home, and how to repair his relationship with his daughter. We discussed strategies for sharing faith in a way that she would accept. I began talking to her about being open to faith conversations with both of her parents. She was resistant at first, but kept thinking about this possibility. Many of our classes and sermons at church were on faith and family. The biggest obstacle between her relationship with her dad was her dad's assumption that his role as "the dad" was to teach her the correct view on scripture whether she agreed or not. Their talks were doctrinal in nature, instead of relational. Unfortunately, this idealistic view of faith in the family had exploded numerous times before leaving scars in the life of this student. I explained that he was trading his "faith relationship" with his daughter for "being right" in his views about faith. He valued good arguments and discussion, but she did not share his enthusiasm for debate. We talked about how to value her opinion even if he didn't agree with her perspective. It didn't happen overnight but slowly their talks began to go better, and she began to appreciate that her dad was really trying to do things differently.

Late one night I got a text from her that said, "I just wanna thank you for talking to my dad about talking to me about faith... and for talking to me about talking to my dad and my family about faith. I don't think I would have opened up to my parents about faith by myself even though I needed to. I don't know what it was in me that made me push my own dad away but I'm happy to say I'm done with that now."

She continued and said "I think even though my family may not even be all together soon I'm getting more and more comfortable talking to my parents about my faith! :)"

Those words instantly brought me to tears. She had gained a faith relationship with her parents that she appreciated and valued amidst the destruction of her traditional family environment.

Our message had made its way through all of the hurt and chaos of a family that was being torn apart. Instead of blaming God for the destruction of her family she found God among the rubble. Weeks later she was baptized and began to live her life for God. All the work to help families put faith back in the home is worth it when you experience moments like these. I know that years after she graduates from the youth group she will still have a relationship with her parents that supports her faith rather than diminishes it. The influence of the youth group will vanish, but the influence in the home that was sparked from the youth ministry will stay with her indefinitely.

The backgrounds of these two students were remarkably similar, but the change in our approach to ministry had changed drastically. We had rediscovered God's plan for faith in the family and we had discovered a role for the youth ministry to help this dad and this student discover God's plan for faith in their home. It had changed the second student's life and even she realized its significance!