

# **Towards a Tribal Youth Ministry: the necessity of age desegregation in our churches. Duncan Campbell, MA**

## **The State of Things**

The idea is simple enough: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." But this simple idea is profoundly discomfoting when it comes to how we do church, and more directly, youth ministry. The simple truth is that all across Christianity, when teens graduate out the youth group they are also graduating church at the same time. You don't have to be George Barna to notice that in most churches there is a gaping hole where the twenty-somethings should be. It's as though there is an unwritten rule somewhere that says 'Church begins at 30.' There are several factors which I believe contribute to this perfect storm, but let's start with the youth group.

Youth groups are amazing at what they do. They have huge per capita budgets, the most forward-thinking practices, the coolest rooms, the trendiest tshirts, the most memorable trips, camps & retreats. They nearly always have the best tech/gear in the church. They have the most engaging worship sets, the catchiest worship songs, the most affable and dynamic speakers, and the most creative among us as their leaders. They are used to getting their hands dirty in service, feeding the homeless, and playing fútbol with poverty-stricken kids in Africa. They are used to full-throttle, well-planned, and image-rich.

And the clock is ticking because, in the current climate, 92% of that is coming to an end as soon as they graduate. A time is coming when they are no longer part of the youth group. So then what?

They will always be welcome at the local congregation, of course, but the local congregation will be enigmatically foreign. Not 'worse' or 'better.' Just different. For in the Congregation, the language is different than that of

Youth Group. The pace is different. The food is different. The worship is different. The messages are different. The ministry is different. So different, in fact, it is often intimidating and unnourishing to the point apathy. So they leave. In droves. They venture out to find their main Christian community elsewhere. Their alternatives are:

1. A college/young adult ministry.
2. Some other Big Church Sunday morning.
3. A small group from church.
4. Become a youth ministry volunteer, hoping to hang on to the glory.
5. Go to another church that 'fits' them, which likely entails a compromise in theology, even if they don't know it.
6. Quit going.

We're not really hoping for options 4-6. Our vision for the college-aged and twenty-somethings is that they become a vibrant, connected, contributing element of our congregations, indeed of the global church body. The problem is that most of them haven't been part of a congregation. They've been part of Youth Group. Think of Youth Group graphically as a one-eared Mickey Mouse, with the Congregation as the 'head' and the Youth Group as the 'ear.' They barely touch.<sup>1</sup>

For far too many of Christian teenagers, "youth group" and "church" are mutually exclusive. They think in terms of one or the other. And we leaders are squarely to blame for this, and for inflicting on them the ensuing culture shock.

I freely admit I could be wrong, but I believe we are now seeing the fruit of the philosophy which drops off a 7<sup>th</sup> grader at the youth ministry and picks him up when he is a senior, expecting him to be a fully mature Christian by the Youth Minister's hands. But we have cast our seeds far too wide and watered them too little, and with the wrong kind of water. Something is missing from Contemporary Youth Ministry, and it's been missing for a while. That said, I'm not advocating a brand new youth ministry model or brand new programming. I'm not trying to change the

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Cummings-Bond, "The One-Eared Mickey Mouse," *Youthworker*, Fall 1989, 76.

What, but the Who. So actually the better statement is "Someone" is missing from Contemporary Youth Ministry.

## The Theology

"Joab said, 'I will not waste time like this with you.' And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. 15 And ten young men, Joab's armour bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him." This passage from 2 Sam. 18:14-15 is about the closest thing to youth group in the Old Testament; to say our relative sample size of youth groups in the bible is quite small is a bit of an understatement. Even if it weren't, I'm not sure that encouraging our teens how to impale people who are stuck in trees is really best for the mission of Jesus. Nonetheless, let's not overlook the power of the older and more experienced giving easy-win opportunities to the younger and less experienced. If ever there was a undervalued virtue in modern youth ministry, that's it.

But since there aren't really youth groups in the Bible, let's look at some relevant passages about spiritual formation of the young, and the elders' role in it. These passages constitute a (non-exhaustive!) foundation of a theology of multi-generational youth ministry.

### Genesis 18:18-19 (NIV)

18 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (emphasis mine)

One of the main reasons God chose Abraham, according to this passage, is *so that* he would pass on his faith to his children and his household. In fact, this passage teaches that unless Abraham does just that, the promises from God will remain unfulfilled. But also notice the distinction made here between 'children' and 'household.' Abraham's mission was to extend far beyond his blood relatives. Indeed, one of the promises made to him in Gen. 12 was that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. His household, i.e., his servants and servants' children as well as his own family, was where the fulfillment of that promise was to begin.

Most every discussion about spiritual formation of children will, and should, include the familiar passage from the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9).

“7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

This is fairly straightforward; teach your children about God at every opportunity. No need to belabor the point here. However, just a few verses later in the same chapter, we find this:

### **Deuteronomy 6:20-25 (ESVUK)**

20 “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ 21 then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. 22 And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. 23 And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. 24 And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. 25 And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.’

Part of what it means to teach our children about God is to tell, and re-tell the stories of God's glory, providence, and grace in our own faith journeys. But first look at the question of the children. Notice that it's assumed that the children will one day ask, “Hey, dad? Why do we have to follow all these rules? How come we have to go to worship?” There's no need to be insulted when children ask the question. It's normal that children will question why we live the way we live. Our life of faith is neither easy nor convenient, which is how most of the world aspires to live. So our naturally curious children will call us on it about the time they really want to sleep late on Sundays. But when that day comes, says Moses, we are not to answer them with rules, citations, and traditions which hold little value to the youth.

We are to answer them first with our stories. We are to answer them with what God has done. Only then will it make sense to follow God's statutes as a Thank You for our salvation. We don't live the way we live because we like the people and wholesome activities. We live the way we live because we were once dead, and Jesus made us alive. Taking cookies to the fire station every week doesn't make much sense to someone who's never been pulled from the flames of a burning building. But to the one who

has been pulled from the flames, weekly cookies not only makes sense, it seems woefully inadequate. So it is with Jesus. So we'd better learn how to tell our stories in compelling ways, because one day our children, and the children of others, are going to ask. It is vital that our responses inspire them.<sup>2</sup> It is a story that deserves to be told inspiringly, after all.

### **Ezekiel 47:21-23 (NIV)**

“So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the sojourners who reside among you and have had children among you. They shall be to you as native-born children of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the sojourner resides, there you shall assign him his inheritance,’ declares the Lord God.”

Ezekiel was written to God's people who were in the exile to Babylon, between 586 and 536 BC. Ezekiel himself was among them. In this passage, God is giving the people a vision of what their reentrance to Canaan will look like one day in their future. In that context, then, there are several relevant observations. First, there will be some non-Israelites--"sojourners"--along with Israel when they return to the promised land, and they will have been part of the Israelite community long enough to have had children. So their children will necessarily intermingle with Israelite children...and their parents. Second, these sojourners are to receive equal treatment; there is to be no difference as to how the Israelites treated these goyim vis-à-vis their brothers. They are to be welcomed into the family of God's people with open arms, the implication being that they will be given ample opportunity to confess the Lord, their males be circumcised, and their families keep Torah. Some will do exactly that. The takeaway? Even as far back as the exile, God makes provision for families without a connection to the Lord to be in close proximity to those who do, and children were part of the equation.

### **Psalm 145:4-12**

“One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD

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<sup>2</sup> So Joel 1:3 (NIV), “Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.” Cf. Psalm 78:1-7; 145:4-12.

is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom."

This is such an appropriate passage for several reasons. First, notice how high God is lifted in exultation! And it's the OLDER generation that's doing it! In our churches, more often than not, it's the teens who get excited about worship; the upbeat fresh songs, the clapping, the general excitement and energy level are all far more common among the young than the old in our day. Not so in this passage. Second, the description of the Lord as gracious and compassionate, etc., is a direct quote from Exodus 34:6-7, the passage in which God reveals his relational character to Moses. That Exodus passage is either directly quoted or alluded to more than two dozen times in the Old Testament alone. One of my professors in grad school used to say that if you want to put your finger on the pulse of the heartbeat of God, put your finger on this passage. So the Psalmist is evoking some powerful imagery, indeed justifying why this God is worthy of the praise at the beginning of the passage. This praise will pass down from one generation to the next. As each generation hears the praise of the one before, they themselves will catch the vision. Ah, but the best part is who will be the eventual beneficiaries of all this praise: all people. What a delightfully oblique reference to the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. And what is it, according to this Psalm, that all people will know? God's mighty acts, and the splendor of his Kingdom.

Did not Jesus come to show us exactly these two anchors, with love as the vessel?

There are many other passages which are important for understanding the intergenerational vision. Among them we see the following trends among passages with a familial context:

"Father's House" is used 27 times; "Household/s" 118 times; "Father's Household" 11 times. "Clan/s," i.e., a several households of the same tribe, is used 226 times. "Tribe/s" = 293 times. "Youth Group" is used zero times.

From my research, here are my top three conclusions.

1. House / Household / Family was the main context for moral education (which included literacy), and the initial context for vocational education (cf. Exodus 12:24-28; Deut. 6:4-9; Is. 28:23-29; Ps. 78:1-7).

2. "Household" included more than blood relatives, e.g., aliens, fatherless, & widows (Ezek. 47:21-23; Deut. 14:28-30; 26:11).
3. Therefore, familial AND extra-familial household members shared the task of educating the children, both morally and vocationally; passing that knowledge on to succeeding generations.

These ideas are not without biblical precedent.

1. MOSES TO JOSHUA (Exod. 17:9; Num. 13; Deut. 31:1-8; 34:9)
2. ELI TO SAMUEL (1 Sam. 3)
3. JESUS TO THE TWELVE (NB: Peter, James, John; John, the Apostle Jesus loved. (esp. John 15))
4. PAUL TO TIMOTHY (1 Cor. 4:17; Acts, Ephesians; 1 Timothy)

None of these proteges were related by blood to their respective mentors, and this is not a list of obscure characters. Another interesting tidbit: in our world, an "orphan" is a child who is without both parents. But in the Biblical world, particularly that of the New Testament, an "orphan" referred to a child who only had one parent, usually the mother. So when the word appears in James 1:27 ("Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." NIV), it is likely that the orphan and the widow are related, i.e., a single-parent household. This also indicates that Timothy could have been an "orphan."

You may not have many teens in your churches who have lost both parents, but I guarantee you've got single-parent household teens by the truck load. Let's find ways for those teens to connect with a father- and mother-figures of faith. The youth minister can introduce and connect people, but it's your boots that should be on the ground.

## **The Vision**

We want our teens to learn to have deep, meaningful fellowship across generations, so that when all the razzle-dazzle of youth ministry is gone, they don't go with it; there will be something more nourishing and substantial there upon which to walk with Jesus. That is what will sustain a young person and keep them plugged in at their new church away from home, indeed anywhere. But it is imperative that we help them exercise their relationship muscle now so they know how to use it freshman year of college. The vision is that our teens will leave our youth group and feel comfortable developing friendships with people twice and three times their age. The vision is that they'll be glad for their time in our youth ministries,

but they are ready for something more mature, not pine for their high school faith days. Of course they'll want to make friends with Christians their own age, but given the current dearth of such people in churches, we must help them learn to get out of their age demographic, if only for the purposes of their Christian walk. If they can learn that one thing, they have taken a big step toward maturity.

In a nutshell, we want to change our youth ministries from being program/activity driven to being relationships/service driven; and that the relationships be with faithful adult Christians. My friend George the Youth Minister, says it this way: We want for this to go from a ministry TO the teens, to a ministry OF the teens. But the good news is, a youth ministry need not jettison its programming. It need only integrate faithful, loving adults of all generations into it. It's the "Follow me as I follow Christ" method. Every teenager deserves to be friends with at least one faithful adult Christian. "And every teenager, left to his own devices, will always gravitate to the oldest person he can find who will take him seriously, and treat him with dignity and respect."<sup>3</sup>

In their survey of the most effective faith-nurturing practices of adults, Johnson & Yorkey found that in the students who continued their faith, more than 90% of them had a half-dozen mentors in their [growing-up years].<sup>4</sup> "Almost without exception, those young people [who came from our youth ministry] who are growing in their faith as adults were teenagers who fit into one of two categories: either 1) they came from families where Christian growth was modeled in at least one of their parents, or 2) they had developed significant connections with an extended family of adults within the church. **How often they attended youth events (including Sunday school and discipleship groups) was not a good predictor of which teens would, and which would not, grow toward Christian adulthood.**"<sup>5</sup> (emphasis mine)

Our marching orders are simple: get in there and cultivate some relationships with the younger generations. Doing so will earn the credibility to pass on your faith, both by word and deed. Everyone of us is a youth minister, whether you are related to the teens in your church or not; to the teens with both mom and dad, to the single-parent teens, and to the teens

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<sup>3</sup> H. Steven Glenn and Jane Nelson, *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World* (Roseville, CA: Prima, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Greg Johnson & Mike Yorkey, *Faithful Parents, Faithful Kids* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 249.

<sup>5</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 2d. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 102.

who show up when they have every reason not to. Otherwise, what models will our teens have? Upon whom will they look? As the sign in the University of Colorado library reads: The generation who knows only itself is destined to remain adolescent forever.

## **The Hows**

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

With Hebrews 12:1-2 planted firmly as your anchor verse for your youth ministry, here are some tangible ways to go Tribal.

1. Get adults in the room for classes, groups, and fellowship. Not only to teach, but just to be there. Engage in the ministry of presence. Presence communicates value.
  - a. Poll the teens,
    - i. Ask which adults of the congregation they'd like to see more of in the youth group. Then go get those adults and tell them that the teens want them! Populate your volunteer pool with these adults.
    - ii. Ask the teens to identify and rank their own love languages. Use these in your ministry.
    - iii. Ask teens to tell you the top 5 ways they want adults in church to let the teens know they care about them.
    - iv. Ask teens to tell you the top 5 ways NOT to do this.
  - b. Tell adults the results (a sermon series, perhaps?) and create a plan for helping the adults live out those connections.

Because in the teens' world, they must know you care about them before they will listen to you about anything. You must build relationship capital and earn the right to be heard. You earn it by doing the things the teens say in the poll.

2. Assign retired people in your church to go to the games, concerts, and performances of the youth group members at their respective schools. Go see the teens in action. Sit with their parents. Afterwards, say the

following: "I love to watch you play."

3. Have parents swap teens for a weekend. Go do something cool. Because then the parents' own teens will get jealous. Which will provide an excuse to go do something cooler next weekend.
4. Have your church's small groups host the youth group for a devotional once a month. Plan the gathering with activities designed for everyone to make a new connection and friend outside their own age demographic.
  - a. Go to Lowe's and grab two paint chips each of about fifty different colors (they're free); two Raspberry Mists, two Midnight Moons, etc.
  - b. At the gathering, pass out one set to the adults and the other to the teens. Then tell them to find their exact match. Ask a question they can both answer. Shuffle the two stacks cards separately. Redistribute. Repeat.
5. Have your men's ministry kidnap the guys of the youth group, either during a Sunday morning class, or a mid-week gathering. Do the same with the girls and the women's ministry. Do an activity (sitting and sharing doesn't count. Get up and move.), then talk about it.
6. Teens need to know about grace, faith, baptism, sanctification, etc. But they also need to know how a faithful Christian grocery shops, works a checking account, buys a car, gardens, fixes stuff, and spends their spare time. Who better to teach them these life basics than you? So go kidnap a teen in the youth group next time you have to run errands on a Saturday. (Green-light it with their parents first. Amber alerts in youth ministry are a resume killer).
7. For college-age students, your church has got about 3 weeks to pull in and embrace new students at the start of the semester. Studies have shown that if a college student doesn't get connected to a church the first three weeks of their freshman year, they are unlikely to ever do it at all. So spend some money and resources making those three weeks of worship distinctly aimed at college students, with sound biblical substance, and great visuals. Go out of your way to make church...there's really no other word...COOL. (Yes, I'm aware we shouldn't go to a church because it's cool. But that's a mature perspective. To an immature

perspective, COOL might be the best outreach tool your congregation will ever use.) And when they come, your church's goal should be for every college student to be greeted by at least 4 church members before the first song starts. And each of those college students should be taken to lunch afterward. Sidenote: this will require some intentionality and planning of your post-worship meal. If you have the "I don't know, where you YOU want to eat," mentality, it'll be tough to plan for taking a college kid out with you.

8. Grandpa-Grandson and Grandma-Granddaughter retreats
9. Dumb Things I Did as a Teenager Night, hosted by the elders and their wives.
10. Encourage the older the ministry potential of social media as a means to stay connected with teens. Then have the younger tutor the elder in how to Tweet, Facebook, etc.