

This was a paper I gave at the biannual “International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry” conference at Oxford in 2003.

“For five years I followed the typical youth group structure- singing, crowd breakers, entertaining activities. We even spent a little time talking about Christ. But sometime between wiping egg off the floor from our latest gag and dreaming of the Video Toaster (??) that would catapult me into big time youth ministry, the question hit me: What am I doing! I realised our youth program wasn’t imparting to kids the essentials for their spiritual growth. Even I related with Christ as though he were a vaguely remembered distant relative rather than an energizing friend. Our program based ministry, since it did little to change kids, had burned me out.” Jeff Anderle ¹

“To just about everybody- save for those of your reading these words- the youth ministry job description must look like a piece of cake: Hang out with the kids, order pizza, play some games, sing some songs, etc. etc.”

Dave Urbanski²

Entertained to Death: How the Funnel Model of Youth Ministry Has Hurt the Anglican Church in Australia.

The all too familiar story of John and Liz.

John and Liz are a married couple in their late ‘20’s. They are committed Christians and attend St. Mark’s faithfully. One Sunday, it was announced that Brett, the youth minister was leaving. While he had only been at the church for 18 months the congregation was told that he needed some time off “to recover”.

With Brett’s sudden departure, the minister made an urgent request from the front of the church. “We need someone to take over the reins of the youth group until we can find a replacement. There are 12 young people who meet each Friday night in the church hall. If no one comes forward who will tell these kids about Jesus?” There was the sound of quiet desperation in the minister’s voice.

The youth group consisted of 10 to 12 young people. It met every Friday night and ran for about two hours. The time was spent hanging around for about fifteen to twenty minutes followed by an hour of fast paced games and activities. This was followed by a short devotion from the Scriptures and then a game or two to finish the night off. It was not the world’s greatest group but it was viewed by all to be better than nothing.

¹ Jeff Anderle, “High School Minister”, *Youthworker* (The Contemporary Journal for Youth Ministry), Winter 1995, p. 14.

² Dave Urbanski, “Staring down the Spectre”, p. 1 *Youthworker*, The Contemporary Journal for Youth Ministry), May/June 2000.

The previous leader had designed the group around the idea that the group could be: A “safe place for young people to go on a Friday night”, and, a “fun Christian event” where a nonChurched youth could come, enjoy a good time and hear a little bit about Jesus. Hopefully, they would keep coming back and then be funneled into a more serious Christian program that would start up on a Sunday. He based his thinking on the some books he had bought at the local Christian bookshop.

Over the next week John and Liz thought long and hard. While John and Liz had never run a youth group before, they thought that maybe they should give it a try. “It can’t be all that difficult and we might as well do it before we decide to have children.” they said to themselves. They met with the minister, told him that they would commit themselves to leading the group for a year. After that they would assess whether they could do it again. The relieved minister thanked them profusely, handed them a stack of books on youth ministry that Brett had left behind and muttered the prayer of Captain Kirk under his breath as they left. “Please Lord, help them to boldly go where no one has gone before. And, please help them to stay on this five year mission.”

A few weeks later the fateful day came when they took over from the exhausted youth minister. They had read the books left behind by Brett. They had also spent a day at a youth ministry seminar run by a church in town with “over 500 young people attending each week”.

After a few weeks of mayhem, broken windows and crowd control in the name of Christ they wondered what were doing wrong. They met with the minister to seek advice (trauma counseling). “We don’t know what is going wrong.” They told him. “We have a tight program of games, with some group activities designed to be fun and exciting. While we are not the world’s greatest communicators, we are faithful each week and and we also try to keep the message simple and topical.”

They lasted about three months. The final straw came when the new kid vomited all over Liz after eating a spoonful of dogfood in a grossout competition. This happened on the same night the minister’s daughter broke down crying after the boys couldn’t guess what word she was trying to spell in ‘bum charades’ (she was trying to wiggle the word “car”. The boys knew this, they just refused to guess the right word because they liked what they saw).

John called a meeting with the minister and told them that they were through. “We gave it our best shot. We just don’t have the energy to continue.” Nodding sadly, the minister understood. A week later they left and the youth group quickly died. The minister prayed that someday soon, someone would come along, dust off the old books on and try the same thing again.

“Last Spring our youth group decided to hold an evangelistic outreach event in our church sanctuary. Our goal was to reach 100 young people, and we wanted to make this an extraordinary night. We devised a plan that included fog machines, special lighting, pyrotechnics.. and even an impressive trick for lighting the band’s drum set on fire.” Brian Durbin³

INTRODUCTION

I write this paper as one who has spent the last 18 years in youth ministry. I write it also as a person who is a member of the Anglican Church of Australia. This communion of churches covers a wide range on liturgies and theology. It is made up of catholic, charismatic, liberal and reformed evangelical traditions. However, there seems to be one area of agreement. The “old way” of doing youth ministry is not working any more. This “old way” is often referred to as the “Funnel”.⁴

This approach to youth ministry is one that is based on the literature coming out of the U.S.A. and includes authors such as Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins. The basic premise is that the youth ministry must be seen as a structure designed to move the unchurched outsider through various types of programs. These are designed to move them from an outer level (evangelism or the “Come or Entry Level”) to an inner level (deep commitment to Christ).

This Funnel appears to me to be the most common way of structuring a youth program in Australia today. This system has impacted every area of our thinking. It has dictated when our groups meet, and what our groups do. It has even impacted what we call ourselves.⁵

“Perhaps the greatest youth ministry influence of the 1980’s and ‘90’s is Duffy Robbins of Eastern College. In his book on foundational youth ministry, “Youth Ministry That Works”, Robbins advocates a funnel concept for organising a youth ministry program. Borrowing form the work of Dennis Miller, he offers the following funnel, where programming is not so dependent on a model per se but rather on strategic categories of ministry focus.”⁶ Dean, Clark, Rahn.

“For a youth program to be well rounded, accomplishing the purpose for which it was designed, there must be some type of formal or informal programming that will meet the needs of kids at each of these levels of commitment. The need to be Come Level programs, geared to the student who is “not into

³ Brian Durbin. “Some like it hot”, *Group*, May/June 2000, p. 86.

⁴ Please note that not all refer to it as a funnel. Various strategies will come up with their own diagram (i.e. Fields will use a baseball diamond). The theory appears to be the same.

⁵ Most groups will meet on a Friday night. This is seen to be the best timeslot for attracting the outsider. In addition to this they often give themselves names that are seen to be attractive to the outsider. Names such as Spew, Wicked, Bomb Squad and Stink are not uncommon.

⁶ Dean, Clark, Rahn. *Starting Right*, (Youth Specialties, Zondervan Publishing House 2001). p. 112

religion at all,” and there need to be programs that will motivate the forward progress and growth of those at the Grow, Disciple, and Develop Levels.” Duffy Robbins⁷

A Further Look Down the Funnel.

One of the main principles of the Funnel is that the local youth group must provide the “front door” for unchurched young people. This place must be a place that is fun, comfortable and nonthreatening.⁸

Robbins states, “Come Level kids, when they attend an activity, are not promising they will worship, sing, pray or study the Bible. They are promising to be there as long as we have what they like. We need to welcome them on those terms. If they are not “fitting in” with what the group is doing, that may be the group’s fault, not the students’. That’s what it means to make a Come Level activity truly an activity for Come Level kids.”⁹

This is why when you walk into your local Christian bookstore you will be swamped with books on games for every occasion. (Some of us will remember the seemingly unending series of ideas books for youth groups entitled “Right On, Far Out, Crazy etc. Ideas for Youth Groups”.) Rarely do you find a book that teaches us how to bring effective prayer or love into our groups. Basic Christian ideas such as these take a back seat to our desperate need for providing a fun, happening environment for the local young people. The idea is simple. Provide activities that will attract the unchurched and then promote a desire for them to explore Christianity more.¹⁰ Once this happens, they move on to a deeper level of commitment.¹¹

⁷ D. Robbins, *Youth Ministry That Works*, (Victor Books, 1991) p. 79-80

⁸ “When an Entry Level student leaves a program targeted to her, the response sought is something like, ‘That was okay even though it was *church!*’” Dean, Clark, Rahn. *Starting Right*, (Youth Specialties, Zondervan Publishing House 2001). p. 119

⁹ *Youth Ministry That Works*, (Victor Books, 1991) p. 88

¹⁰ Robbins again, “I am amazed when youth workers question me with genuine sincerity saying, “I don’t understand it. We get 40 kids out to our swim party at the lake, but we only got 14 at our Bible study Tuesday night.” I want to smile and say, “Hey, welcome to the world! Kids like swimming better than they like studying the Bible!” Let’s face that, understand it, and then move on. p. 81

¹¹ “... it is also important to recognise that students arrive at every program in very different places- developmentally, spiritually, and emotionally. For a variety of reasons, every initial student goes through unique stages of spiritual development and religious interest, and in some cases they change from week to week, especially at the upper levels of the Funnel. These initial attitudes, which are deeply personal and immensely powerful, are ultimately the most important direct factor in a youth ministry program’s ability to touch a student at any meaningful level.” Dean, Clark, Rahn. *Starting Right*, (Youth Specialties, Zondervan Publishing House 2001). p. 118.

“One of the issues that really engages the contemporary church is the ‘youth’ question. Why are there so few young people at church? How can we get them there? There is much anguish on this topic, as it has been correctly perceived that if the visibly ageing congregations are not replaced by some newer members, many churches will have to close down. The church’s methods of approaching the crisis to date seem somewhat ineffective.”

Caroline Miley¹²

This Leaky Funnel! (Or, The State of Youth Ministry in Australia Today)

In brief, there are a number of serious health issues we are confronting in the Anglican Church in Australia.

1. An astounding lack of committed young people.

It must be said that if our success was to be judged on merely our numerical strength, we would be in a sad state indeed. It appears to be an accepted reality that many of our churches have little or no young people in them. The church which has a large youth group is highly unusual.¹³

2. A pathetically high fallout rate.

Those groups which do have young people tend to lose them in the long run. In my experience many youth leaders meekly accept the fact that they will lose well over half their youth within the space of a year or two. Many have told me that they expect 80-90% of their group to fall away.

Our youth groups tend to be small. They also tend to lose most of their membership over a short period of time. These two facts lead to our next problem.

3. A shortage of spiritually mature leaders.

We have a lack of capable, eager, spiritually mature leaders. Those that remain in our youth groups have survived whatever storms caused others to leave. It is from these remaining few that we must choose our leadership team. Quite often choosing a leader comes down to simply saying, “Hey, Sandra is still here. Let’s choose her to lead the youth group!”

4. Our style of youth ministry treats leaders like French Fries- we burn them to a crisp.

¹² C. Miley, *The Suicidal Church* (Pluto Press Australia, 2002) p.30-31

¹³ The recently release “National Church Life Survey” gives detailed statistics. If you have the stomach for it it can be easily accessed on the internet.

Those churches who do have a youth group leader are characterised by keeping them for only a short time. The average stay appears to be 14-18 months.¹⁴ Long term health and youth ministry do not appear to be compatible.

5. An incredible emptiness in our adult congregations.

It is rare to find a church that has a thriving group of 18-30's.¹⁵ If they do, it is either because of a successful youth ministry (a rare event) or, they have gutted the churches around them. These churches become a vortex which grows and grows as more young adults join (in fact, they often get the reputation of being a 'Christian singles club' or the place you go to meet a partner.

We are lacking young adults because we are not producing strong Christian young people who grow up to be strong Christian young adults. Is there a connection between our style of youth ministry and the void of young adults in most of our churches? Absolutely.

6. A sad immaturity amongst many of the adults who have 'survived' our groups.

Many of the adults in our churches have hardly moved onto Christian maturity. Sure, they can tell you about Jesus' death on the cross. They can even quote the odd memory verse or two.¹⁶ But quite often we have adults who are way behind where they should faithwise. They are tight with their money. They have kids who they would rather see excel in school than in the faith. They are so busy with their work that they can barely get up the energy to go to church a few times a month let alone a bible study during the week. Regular daily devotions, forget it!

It is too simplistic to say that all the problems in our adult congregations come from their time in youth group years earlier. It can and must be said however, that many of the young people who survive their youth groups do so at an immature level. The groups which are built on a high level of entertainment and attraction cannot help but produce spiritual immaturity.

What happened?

¹⁴ Note footnote 20, "*No Longer Guests*", Journal of Youth and Theology (Vol.1:No. 2; Nov. 2002). Here Meter & Turpin state that the average tenure of youth ministers in the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church was under fourteen months.

¹⁵ "A study conducted at Macquarie University in 1999 confirmed what other evidence had long suggested, that in the last 30 years there has been an enormous decline in numbers of young churchgoers, especially those in their 20's and early 30's." C. Miley, *The Suicidal Church*, p.20

¹⁶ Usually the best they can do is John 3:16. Either that or you'll get John 11:35- 'Jesus wept', with a smirk!

Somewhere along the line, a model of youth ministry became popular that is both unbiblical and generally unproductive. It is a style of ministry that resembles a social club rather than a group of people who follow Jesus.¹⁷

The definition of insanity is: Doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting different results.

Leaving the Funnel in the Gutter.

(Or, Baseball Diamonds don't necessarily take you home!)

There are a number of problems with the funnel understanding of youth ministry. It is rife with theological and practical problems. The nature and scope of this paper constrains us from outlining these at length so the critique offered will be brief.

Practical Issues Concerning the Funnel.

1. It takes too many resources.

Most churches do not have the resources to run a number of concurrent programs. We do not go to a church like Saddleback in California. To try and run programs that move young people from Community to Core and all the C's in between is just not viable for the average youth leader (esp. those like John and Liz).

2. Most groups never get beyond the first level.

Since most groups do not have the resources to run a full funnel they tend to get stuck at the "Come level". That is, they never get beyond evangelising and move on to discipling those they have evangelised.

3. It produces a false dichotomy- fun or serious.

Most youth leaders are deeply convinced that they are unable to run a program that is thoroughly Christian and attractive at the same time. They have bought into much of the Funnel's theory yet realise that they cannot run it successfully. Therefore, many youth leaders try and compromise by having a "fun" segment which consists of activities and then a "serious" segment. The fun segment rarely has anything to

¹⁷ Wendy Zoba Murray offers a helpful insight. "Television had not yet arrived, so these youth people -as a former Youth for Christ worker put it-'didn't know what to do on a Saturday night.' The churches were not addressing 'youth ministry', so to fill the 'entertainment void' and reach young people with the gospel, 'God raised up organisations like Young Life and Youth for Christ". Wendy Murray Zoba, "The Class of '00", *Christianity Today*: February 3, 1997.

do with the serious and vice versa.¹⁸ This is an unhelpful pattern as it teaches young people that church is either entertainment or boredom. We need to run programs that are thoroughly Christian and enjoyable at the same time.

4. It promotes fatigue.

This style of program is notoriously taxing on those who try and run it. Anecdotal evidence in Australia points to the average tenure of a youth minister being under eighteen months. This may be the case in most parts of the Western World.¹⁹ In my experience, the greatest cause of fatigue for Australian youth leaders was trying to the high energy, multi level Funnel program.

5. Most young people never make the transition from youth group to the church body as a whole.

Too many churches are characterised by a lack of harmony between the youth group and the congregation as a whole. The youth group is often perceived as a completely separate entity to the church itself. This is unhelpful in both the short term and long term.

6. The focus is placed on the unchurched outsider at the expense of the regular.

It is no surprise that we produce malnourished Christians. The whole focus of our programs tends to be on attracting the unchurched. This is usually done at the expense of feeding those we *have* reached.

7. The traditional model can promote an unhelpful pattern of relationships.

Leadership can often seen to be entertainers rather than mentors.

Theological Issues

1. The funnel is based on trickery and filled with deception.

The basic premise of the Funnel is unChristian. The ‘front door’ or the entry level to the Christian faith is not built on the call to follow Jesus nor a call to join the people of God. It is of course, an enjoyable time or a “safe” environment. Sure, there is a devotion or gospel talk somewhere in the evening. However, this is rarely the reason why the regulars invite their friends. In fact, it is usually not even the reason promoted by the youth leaders. They will often use terms like, “We’re going bowling so make sure you invite your friends!” Or, “Next week is going to be a real fun time, so bring a friend. Does this square with the words of the Apostle Paul (see 2 Cor. 4:1-5 and 1 Thess. 2:3-6a)?

2. The Funnel hides Jesus.

¹⁸ It is not unusual for youth leaders to bribe the kids along the way saying something to the effect of, “If you will just calm down and listen to the Bible talk for five minutes we will play another game!”

¹⁹ “No Longer Guests”, *Journal of Youth and Theology* (Vol.1:No. 2; Nov. 2002), footnote 20.

The message of Jesus can be distilled down to a message of “Come to me.” He is the bread of the world, the living water, the resurrection & life, the gate, the good shepherd, the light, etc. The Bible seems to be telling us that Jesus is attractive enough without fancy programming. We must offer Him to the world on His terms, not through clever nights out.

3. The Funnel hides the Christian Community.

We are to be a place of love, salt and light. Our attraction lies in this, not in activities or entertainment. It is the changed life and the loving Christian community that must attract the outsider.

4. The Funnel does not use the supernatural power of God.

Much of our programming is done at the expense of prayer, loving relationships and growth in Christ. We spend so much time trying to be attractive that we neglect the power of God that will bring true growth. We must learn to wage spiritual war using divine weapons.²⁰

5. It can reduce the call for serious commitment to Christ as the program is geared toward attraction at the expense of radical discipleship.

The words of Jesus are straightforward and clear. If any man is to come after him, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow him (Mark 8:34). In the Christian life we must never take the easy option. It is the same in our youth groups. A program committed to good times and attraction first is one that in reality places discipleship second.

On a final note it must be said that many defenses of the Funnel do so with an odd logic and an equally odd exegesis of the Scriptures.

On one hand we are told that Jesus and Paul went out into the world of the non-Christian visiting them to “bring the visible, tangible reality of the gospel to those who were *not* seeking (for they did not yet know what their heart sought). In fact, *seeking* is the job of the church not the job of the disinterested.” Yet in almost the next breath they will state that, “The Funnel of Programming represents the most effective, historically viable, and biblically appropriate of contemporary youth ministry models.”²¹ This seems to be

²⁰ “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” 2Cor. 10: 3-5

²¹ Dean, Clark, Rahn. *Starting Right*, p. 118

a contradiction. Are we to seek those who by nature do not seek or are we to set up an entry point in our programs for the seeker to come and join us for awhile?

There is also a problem of exegesis. In their support of the Funnel, Dean, Clark and Rahn use 1 Thess. 2:8.²² This verse however, must not be understood outside of the context of Acts 17:1-9 (Paul's first visit to Thessalonica.). Luke clearly records that Paul went firstly to a synagogue ("as his custom was" Acts 17:2) and preaches to a group of strangers. Paul's methodology (at least in Acts 17) was not to share his life first and to make the uncomfortable "safe". It appears to be just the opposite. Especially when viewed in light of the resultant behavior-the Jews ran him out of town!

"The network explored different models of ministry with young people. As part of this topic the network affirmed the paradigm shift from the fun and games model of youth ministry to a discipleship model of youth ministry. It was recognised that the fun and games model of youth ministry is not as successful in developing the faith of young people as a discipleship model where there is a focus on small groups and bible study." A Report by the National Youth Network of General Synod (Y-Net) to the Standing Committee of General Synod 2001 (Anglican Church, Australia)

"There is no religious point at all in a 15-year-old attending a youth group if what they do there is not specifically religious. They need to be trained in discipleship in a way that they could not be as children- to understand the things of God, to learn about the faith, to learn to pray and to practise their faith actively." Caroline Miley²³

The Way Forward (Or, Turning this Funnel Upside down!)

The whole premise of putting on a program to attract the young people in is a program built on "bringing them to us". This neither reflects the incarnation, "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" nor the message of Jesus, "go out into the world" nor the example of the early church (Jn 1:14; Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:42.)

The way forward is not that complex. The average youth leader should not be concerned with running a number of programs aiming at taking young people through various hoops (levels). We have seen that there are numerous theological and practical difficulties with this approach. A much easier and more satisfactory approach is to see the local youth group as a place of building strong Christians and then using what is built to reach out to the nonChristian.

²² "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." See *Starting Right*, p.121, 122.

²³ *The Suicidal Church*, p.33

Building strong Christians.

The first thing the church must be concerned with is *building young people to be strong Christians*. This is accomplished by running a group that is unashamedly Christian. It is characterised by things such as prayer, studying the Bible, love for each other, holy living, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ This group will help young people to follow Jesus, live for him, pray to him, and make a difference for him in their local community. As the group does this they will try to live in harmony as God's people. Their time together will reflect the fact that they are a community that seeks to live for the King and in His Kingdom.

Reaching the unchurched.

As the group does this, it will encourage the members within the group to reach out. Each member of the group is actively being equipped to reach out to those they are in regular contact with (i.e. school friends). They do this two ways, by *going out to* bring the message of Christ to the non-Christian in and, by *living differently* in their community in everyday living. As they live differently they may be asked to "give a reason for the hope that is in them" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Going out into the world.

The biblical mandate for this is seen in the well known Matt. 28:29. We see this in the life of the Apostle Paul who made it his mission to go to the Gentiles to tell them about Jesus (Gal. 2:9, Rom. 15:16.). An example of this is the previously mentioned Acts 17:2 where we see Paul going into a synagogue 'as his custom was'. Paul could well have sent up some sort of tent making drop in center where he could give a seminar on tent repair and finished with a short talk on "how Jesus can fix your tent". This was not his style nor should it be ours. One of the roles of the local youth group must be to send young people out into the world to seek those who are lost.

Living differently.

These young people will also be equipped to live lives that are markedly different from those whom they live with. Reflecting the words of Jesus, we are to be "salt and light". That is, we are to be characterised by good deeds. When people see our good deeds they will 'praise our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16.). Our young people are to be noted by living "such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:12).

²⁴ Each person may wish to add to this list other things such as helping the poor and evangelism

In addition to this, these young people are to be marked by love. By loving the other member of the group and those they come into contact with, they will show the world that they are followers of Jesus.²⁵

The Importance of Unity within the Group.

On a final (brief) note, it must be said that the local youth group must be a Christian community which is characterised by unity. It must reflect Ps. 133. We see here that God loves it when His people are unified. It is a fantastic thing- rich and refreshing. It is also clear that when this happens the Lord blesses this group with his ultimate gift, eternal life. How does this happen? In my experience it is when people who are outside the Christian faith come to a group which is 'dwelling in unity'. They see and feel this unfamiliar thing and want to know what it is that makes the group so different.

²⁵ John 13:34-35. There are numerous other bible references that could be examined. In short, the message of the New Testament is that by living differently we testify to the world that we are followers of Jesus (cf. Titus 2:10; James 2:18; 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:17;