

Re-dreaming (Or, Its time to 'Etch A sketch' youth ministry)

I have been in youth ministry for over 20 years. For around half that time I have been a consultant for various denominations in various parts of the world. I have visited a zillion youth groups in a zillion churches. Like most jobs, it has an upside and a downside. I get to hangout with a lot of youth ministers and enjoy the common ground we share. We can laugh together and pray together over our similar struggles.

However, there is the not-so-good side to visiting youth groups. I am saddened by the situation that most of us are in. There are many of us who are disheartened, surrounded by enemies, and barely keeping our head above water. There seems to be (in my experience) a commonality about youth ministry around the globe. Here are some of my observations.

We are not attracting many new kids to our groups

Our numbers are not impressive. In my experience if you have a youth ministry at all you are doing well. If you have more than 12 youth- you are large. The problem is, there is always a 'large church down the road'. For some reason this unusual phenomenon is considered normal by most churches. We look at ourselves and wonder why we are abnormal.

There is serious irony here. What is the characteristic that is common to almost every single youth group? It is a desire to grow. We give ourselves trendy names to attract kids, we meet at times best suited for growth and we run programs filled with content designed to be appealing to those who don't know Christ. The tragedy is, we aren't gaining any ground.

We aren't keeping most of the kids we attract

When I speak to youth leaders most of them will stare out into space and admit the same thing- most of their kids will eventually leave the faith. In other words, most of the young people that they have poured their energy into will soon drop off the face of the earth and move on.

To drive this case home further- take a look at your denomination or church or area that you live in. Is the average church bulging to the seams with 18-40s who used to go to the youth group but are now older? My guess is you're church will be like most other churches- we've poured countless dollars and time into a youth ministry that hasn't produced much long-term fruit. Our vacant young adult congregations are proof of this.

We are producing a generation of malnourished adults

So many youth programs are built on a dose of entertainment followed by a message that 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you'. This is repeated week after week with a mission trip thrown in for good measure. When a young person does actually stick around they are not properly nourished to lead a life for Christ in this hostile world. They have not been prepared thoroughly to stay strong and healthy for the long haul. What they do know is this, youth ministry was a fun 'happening' time with a message of God's love thrown in. They couldn't tell you what God's word says about how to spend their money, how to witness in the workplace or how the book of Genesis relates to the book of Revelation.

It is like we have inherited this huge etch-a-sketch. Do you remember the Etch A Sketch? Many of us had one as a kid. You draw a picture and when you are finished you shake it up and the picture is gone. It is my contention that the picture we have inherited in youth ministry must now be shaken up the youth ministry picture and erased. It is time to imagine and draw a new picture. What would this picture look like you ask?

Redrawing youth ministry

Simply put, there are a number of new pictures that must replace the old.

1. We must drop any idea that the good news of Jesus is a 'package' or 'product' that needs to be sold to a skeptical audience.

Our models of youth ministry are, by and large, built on the principal of 'bring them in through clever programming and then try and seal the deal through a palatable gospel message'. This hasn't worked in the past and won't work now. The gospel is a message that needs to be fearlessly preached and lived out in radical discipleship. We must be salt and light first and foremost. This is how we will reach our skeptical audience.

This may mean that...

2. Less is more.

In the past, numbers have been our benchmark for success. This needs to be erased.

Anyone involved in youth ministry for more than a few months knows that numbers is a slippery gauge for success. We must work actively for quality over quantity. Fewer kids with a higher level of commitment to Christ is where we must head.

In order to achieve this we must ...

3. Recapture the Biblical picture of the Christian community as our model for youth ministry.

It is hard to shake a corporate marketing model for youth ministry. It has thoroughly shaped our culture saturating everything including youth ministry. We must recapture our past. Acts 2:42-47 is our model for success. Devotion to the word and prayer, commitment to regular fellowship with each other over all the other clutter that this world provides. Generosity towards each other that is constantly amazing. The worship and praise to God that has long been forgotten by this dead world. This is what we can and must do in youth ministry.

One of the beautiful things about our God is that he is the God who can bring to fruit those imaginations that dream for Him. It is time to dream again. We must erase any practice that is unfruitful and replace this with a dream.

Who has a mind to dream this dream with me?