

This is an edited version of the annual ‘Peter Corney lecture’ that I delivered a few years back at Ridley College in Melbourne Australia. To my American readers- don’t take too much offence!

‘Fair dinkum Youth Ministry

Introduction

I spent the first 20 years of my life in America. My entire knowledge about Australia came through the song ‘Tie me kangaroo down sport’. (Add to this “throw another shrimp on the barbie and you have summed up the total body of knowledge on Australia for most Americans). I then spent the next 23 years living in Sydney.

My first introduction to the real Australia was at a boat dock in Kauai, Hawaii. I was living on a boat at the time and I saw a yacht from Australia called “Fair dinkum”. To my mind this was the strangest phrase I had ever heard. My buddy and I mocked it and laughed for days. However, few months later I met my first Aussies and they educated us as to the meaning of this puzzling phrase. They told us that it meant true or trustworthy or ‘for real’. I still thought was odd but accepted it and moved on. It is ironic that many years later I have come to use this expression quite often myself. I will often exclaim “Fair dinkum” in amazement or exasperation. Or I will use it to describe something that is genuine, real and true (such as, “Fair dinkum this was a good youth ministry conference!”).

For those of you who need enlightenment on the phrase, a quick search on the net brought these definitions for ‘fair dinkum’,

“True or genuine” (The Macquarie ABC Dictionary)

“Early on it could also mean something honest, reliable or genuine. Fair dinkum is recorded from 1890 in the sense of fair play, and soon after in the way that Australians and New Zealanders still use it—of something reliable or genuine. It

originally meant, 'work'. In *Robbery Under Arms*, Rolf Boldrewood writes, "It took us an hour's hard dinkum to get near the peak". From this came fair dinkum – originally meaning "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay". (Kel Richards, *Word Watch*, ABC News & Parliamentary Radio).

Why do I tell you about the delights of this strange phrase? It is my contention that youth ministry today is, for the most part, *not* fair dinkum. We have left undone what we ought to have done and have not done what we ought to have done. However, we don't need mercy. Instead we need to overhaul much of what we understand to be best practice in youth ministry.

My observations on the struggles most of us share in youth ministry

Where have all the young people gone?

While we must not equate health with numbers, it is a concern that many (most?) churches either have no youth ministry or a very small one. In my experience any group over 12 is to be considered 'large'.

There is real irony here. If you spend some time reflecting on what is the driving force of most youth ministry in Australia is the desire for numerical growth. We give our groups names designed to be attractive (NRG, Explosion, Hype etc). We meet at a time that is geared toward numerical growth (Friday nights). And finally, we fill our programs with content designed to be attractive (the main culprit being pointless games, entertainment and social activities).

However, many mainline denominations are now in the state where over one half of their churches are without a youth ministry altogether. We are in an unenviable situation.

Why don't they seem to stay around?

Our next problem is the dismal dropout rate among the young people in our groups. Most groups see the vast majority of the teenagers up and leave after a few weeks or months. In the end the leaders are left with a few kids who survived and probably came from a church family anyway.

It appears as though our lack of effective youth ministry is contributing to a dearth of 18-40 year old across the board. Far too many churches have little or nothing to show for decades of youth ministry. In fact, they are characterized by a sad geometry. As the young people grow older, there are less of them around.

Why aren't they stronger?

Problem three is the impoverished spiritual state of our young people. They have been fed a diet of sport and recreation with a short devotion telling them that 'God has a wonderful plan for their life if they turn to Jesus' with little else. It is no wonder that many of these young people grow up to be fragile Christian adults.

Where oh where can I find some leaders?

The fourth problem I encounter is the incredible fatigue among our youth leaders. Youth leadership in our churches resembles a revolving door. A year or two is about all we can expect from the average paid youth minister. Even less for a volunteer.

Community misconception

Many of the locals in our suburbs see the church as a community centre where they have yoga rather than a place where a group of young people meet each week because of Jesus. When you ask some of the locals their impression of the youth group that meets in the church they will either say, "Huh? The what?" Or, they will smile and say, "Oh yes. I used to go to youth group. We played some lovely games and learned how to be nice. Its where I met my husband you know!"

We must not kid ourselves; we are having minimal community impact.

When I look at youth ministry I shake my head and say 'fair dinkum'. How could it be this bad?

The answer, of course, is to blame the Americans!

What we have inherited from America: the 'ills' of the 'als'.

If you walk around an average Aussie street you will see young people wearing fashions straight out of VH-1 and the hip hop L. A. culture. You will eat at fast food restaurants keen to supersize you built by multi-national food chains out of America. If you go to a youth group, you will no doubt find a model that has been shipped over by a book selling mega successful American youth minister.

While the Australian culture has usually had a well-founded skepticism about Yankee imports, it has embraced the models of youth ministry from America with open arms. How perplexing.

Lets take a quick look at some of the 'als' that have influenced us.

'AI' #1: Attractional

The idea is simple, instead of running a program for Christian young people, you run a program designed to attract the outsider and then bring them to faith in Christ. The usual method is through high energy activities and entertainment. After all, young people have a lot of energy and are always searching for something new and fun. What better place to provide it than the church?

Throughout the decades we have used a number of things to attract young people according to the culture of the day. There have been dances, concerts, games, moshes- whatever young people are in to.

This is the reason why many churches have debated whether or not to fill their carpark with a skateboard ramp!

‘AI’ #2: Intentional programming

The most common form of youth ministry today is intentional programming. This is a natural evolution from the attractional style above. This is simply a strategy of running a system of events intended to hit a target audience. The goal is to move them from outsider to disciple through various events or programs. Generally there is a geometric diagram associated with this. There are funnels, archery targets, baseball diamonds, and layered wedding cakes.

At present the most famous proponent of this model of ministry is Doug Fields. His baseball diamond has impacted youth ministry all over the world (While I mean no disrespect to Doug, I must point out that real Aussies play cricket!).

‘AI’ #2: Relational (or incarnational) programming

This one seems to have impacted the U.K. in particular. It is also felt strongly down under. This view of ministry is built around the youth minister going out to develop friendships with non-Christian youth. Hopefully, he/she will soon earn the trust of this young person leading to a conversation about Christ. In addition to this, the young person will see Jesus in the life of the youth leader and be impacted through their witness.

This is why in the ‘80s & ‘90s most youth ministers wore black Metallica t-shirts and had their ears pierced. Relating to the target audience was king. I must admit I spent a few years trying this style of youth ministry. I hung out with the kids in my Men at

Work shirt and repeatedly talked about how I saw Led Zeppelin in 1976. In my naivety I thought this gave me instant cred. However, all I seemed to get was puzzled looks and I could swear that sometimes I could hear them mutter, 'nerd' under their breath.

Jabbing a needle into the ills (Or, an Aussie perspective on American youth ministry imports)

These forces in youth ministry have dictated almost everything we Aussies do in youth ministry. And criticizing them is a bit like knocking your mother's cooking- you have grown up on it and it is part of you whether you like it or not.

However, it must be done in the search for 'fair dinkum' youth ministry.

However, there are a number of questions that must be raised. (Please note that I am in no way questioning the integrity of anyone who has used these styles of ministry).

1. *We must not divorce the American culture from the American church.* Those of us who have visited churches in the U.S.A. may have had a disconcerting experience. We drive through the 1000 car parking lots in amazement. We scratch our heads as we walk through the buildings with their thermostatically controlled windows opening and closing according to the temperature!. We marvel at the coifed preacher ("how does he do that with his hair?"). This experience can lead you to believe that not only are you in another country, you are on another planet!

Some of us have muttered under our breath, "Fair dinkum, I'm not in Oz anymore!" We must be careful when we import a youth ministry strategy from this culture. It is a culture that calls itself 'Christian'. Mine doesn't, not anymore. The USA is a culture that cares about what it's leader believes. We don't. America is a culture of 'churchianity' as well as Christianity. Australia's church is the pub. Our religion: football.

2. *We must remember that 'the business of America is business!'* I am often asked, "Is Australia much different from America?" Yes, Virginia it is. The lifeblood of the USA is

the free enterprise system. This underpins the whole of the economy. It also appears to direct the way the church does business. Growth is king. Bigger is better. More people mean you are doing a better job (Really?).

I have never quite uncovered what 'the business of Australia is'. I am sure that it is not business! Having a barbeque with mates may be more where we are at.

In short, youth ministry Australian style must be built on concepts other than free enterprise.

3. *We must be careful of shallow waters.* There is a famous expression used to describe the church in America, "It is a mile wide and an inch deep!" (Some here might be tempted to use this to describe the culture in general!). I do not believe this is true here in Australia (nor in the U.K.). I was immediately struck by the 'fair dinkumness' of the Australian culture. While it takes a while to get to know people, once you do you tend to go to a deeper level. Aussies like the genuine, things that feel right and true. They tend to run from froth and bubble. We must do some soul searching as to what is really 'fair dinkum attractive' in ministry.

In short, it saddens me to say this my brothers and sisters, but youth ministry in the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit appears to have been more influenced by the mega churches in California and Illinois than by the Bible on our bedside table. My U.K. friends- you must not fall into this trap.

Towards a conclusion

One of my favorite films of all time is the original Batman movie (the real one with Adam West, not the fraudulent later version!). In one of the more memorable scenes Batman is running around on a boat dock trying to dispose of a bomb. As he runs from one side to the other he exclaims, "Some days you just can get rid of a bomb." In the

same way it is very difficult to let these models of ministry go- in many ways they are part and parcel of who we are.

However, it is time to let go of what we have adopted from overseas as we head towards developing a much more effective, 'fair dinkum' Christian youth ministry.

Rethink our strategic priorities

The first thing we must do is to rethink where we put our time and effort in youth ministry. It is my strong contention that if you have any young people in your church at all you must focus your immediate energies on bringing them to maturity in Christ. Teach them to pray, to live a life of worship, to understand God's Word. Mentor them. Help them to serve their brothers and sisters. Teach them to be holy.

In our desperate attempt to win the outsider we have sacrificed too many Christian teenagers on the altar of evangelism.

Following on from this we must

Rethink our understanding of effective evangelism

The best evangelism is people based not program based. Most of us know this. Therefore we must raise up a new generation of young people who are 'salt and light' and 'live such good lives among the pagans that the non-Christian will see their good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us' (Matt. 5:13-16 & 1Pet. 2:12).

Our goal must be to develop young people who have a 'contagious holiness' that is evident and attractive.

We must also abandon any hope of running a program designed to be attractive through entertainment or sport. Our attraction lies in our godly community and the message of Jesus that lies at the centre.

Therefore, we must seriously reconsider our marriage to entertainment

Getting rid of entertainment in youth ministry is like taking a bone away from a dog. Most youth leaders just don't want to do it. However, it must be done. We are called to be makers of disciples not people who fill up dates on a bored teenager's social calendar.

A Strategic overhaul of our systems

We must develop a long-term approach to ministry where our children's ministry (assuming your church has one) is linked with the youth ministry. This is then linked in with the young adults ministry. In other words, we must actively work against the sad geometry of our churches (as the kids get older, they get fewer). The strategic youth leader will see that real growth comes long term. They will do everything in their strength to ensure that young people grow to be strong adults.

Similarly, we must link the youth ministry with the overall church.

Too often the youth group is seen as some satellite that 'hovers somewhere around the church and then comes crashing down like Skylab'. Or, it is seen as 'that group of young people who move the furniture around and scuff up the holy table'. Our goal must be to strategically link the youth group to the adults in the church. They must have an intimate relationship in worship, in service and in evangelism. One simple way that this can be seen is by having older members of the congregation assisting with the leadership of the youth ministry.

We must promote a longevity of leadership

This almost goes without saying. We must have youth leaders who around for at least one high school generation. Two if possible.

We must build our groups around spiritual disciplines

Our mandate is to be places where 'the word of Christ dwells in us richly' (Col. 3:16). We must 'devote ourselves to prayer' and we must 'love one another deeply' (Col. 4:2 & 1 Peter 1:22).

Is it possible to use Acts 2: 42-47 as our model for youth ministry rather than the best USA? I hope so.

We must leave the numbers game to the Americans

It is not a sin to be small. In fact, there are many quite influential movements that numerically may be quite small (i.e. the Boy Scouts, St. John's first aid etc.) It has been said countless times before but our aim is quality not quantity.

Finally, we must see that youth ministry is hard work. It is 'dinkum'

Ministry is rarely easy. Youth ministry is no different. It takes time and effort. It is three steps forward and two steps back. It is not built on quick solutions or simple formulas. It takes time and effort. Many of us need to change our thinking smash the mold we have inherited and begin again. This is very hard to do.

Final, final words. It is my contention that God has raised up a generation of spiritually hungry young people longing for Christian community. This postmodern culture has raised up quite possibly is the easiest generation to reach in a long time. They long for meaning. They are searching for community. They want to participate and connect with the things of God.

Fair dinkum, will any of us try and get it right this time?

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