



BY MARK CANNISTER



# Doing It How They Did It

## Historic Foundations of Youth Ministry

As a group, youth workers are not big on tradition. At least that's what they say. However, if you scratch under the surface, you quickly will find a different story.

The fact is that youth workers are fastidious followers of tradition, doing things in youth ministry today that worked for earlier generations of youth workers. As I can attest, that can be a very good thing.

I came of age as a teenager with bell-bottom jeans and the classic music of the '70s. One of the most memorable things from my teen years are the weekly breakfasts my youth leader would have with me and the other kids in our group. He drove around town early in the mornings picking us up before school to have breakfast and talk about God. Nothing heavy, just breakfast and a conversation, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything—not even sleep.

A decade later, I was a youth worker doing the same thing with kids. Breakfast at Wendy's every Wednesday morning before school for a time of sharing and perhaps a devotional and prayer before school. If I cancelled a week, I heard about it. Cancel youth club; cancel church; cancel the retreat; but *never* cancel breakfast, kids warned.

Fast-forward to 2011. I have a daughter in high school who loves to sleep in; getting her out of bed requires a nuclear weapon, except on Thursday mornings! What happens on Thursday mornings? Breakfast with youth leaders, of course! She's up and out to breakfast by 6 a.m., 90 minutes before school begins.

Some things in ministry transcend cultural changes. Usually these things are timeless principles of ministry, but sometimes they can be programs that are deeply rooted in core principles. Here are four core principles youth workers have



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embraced in the past 75 years in one form or another.

### 1. Clarity of Purpose

“Where there is not vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18)

From the very beginning, ministry to teenagers was marked by a clear sense of purpose.<sup>1</sup> Men and women of integrity sought to help young people.

The YMCA movement in America (1851) aimed to help young people maintain their faith after moving into the city. Francis Clark’s Society for Christian Endeavor (1881) in Portland, Maine, strove to strengthen the Christian endeavor of his young people. Evelyn McClusky’s Miracle Book Clubs and Torrey Johnson’s Youth for Christ held four clear goals; chief among them was to reach out to youth with the gospel of Christ.

These early ministries helped set the stage for contemporary youth ministry and each ascribed to a bold sense of purpose. Perhaps Mike Yaconelli said it best when he declared: “Youth ministry is about bringing kids into the presence of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

This sense of clear purpose has marked youth ministry from the beginning, and each time youth ministry has veered off course, it has been partly because of confusion of purpose—not unlike the church in general.

In the late '90s, Doug Fields operationalized the concept of purpose for youth workers in the bestselling youth ministry book of all time, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*.<sup>3</sup> Fields was able to articulate for the youth ministry world what most youth workers intuitively knew to be essential, but struggled to implement.

Independently of Fields, Merton Strommen’s<sup>4</sup> exhaustive research confirmed

the importance of this principle as 2,416 youth workers declared that a “clearly stated mission” was one of the most critical aspects of a successful youth ministry; without it they would be lost in a fog.

Mark DeVries<sup>5</sup> recently reaffirmed the importance of this principle based on consultations with more than 100 churches striving to re-engineer their student ministries. Simply put, if you have not discovered the purpose of your ministry or are unable to communicate that purpose to students, volunteers, parents, supervisors and colleagues with absolute clarity, then your ministry will run out of steam sooner or later. On the other hand, I strongly suspect that every person you might consider a hero in youth ministry has developed his or her ministry on this timeless principle of clarity of purpose.

### 2. Authentic Leadership

“Not that I have obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12)

By the 1920s, high schools had emerged in most American communities, and young people developed a sense of pride and spirit in their local schools. While churches were running youth societies modeled after Francis Clark’s Christian Endeavor ministry, people such as Lloyd Bryant, Percy Crawford and Oscar Gillian were reaching out to young people through radio shows and youth rallies.

The youth rallies of the 30s and 40s were wildly successful as thousands of young people came to faith through the bold preaching of youth evangelists, including Billy Graham.

In the youth rally era, leaders exhibited an incredibly high level of authenticity.

They networked with each other and shared ideas freely.

This spirit of cooperation and united purpose caused speakers at the rallies to declare: “It’s much easier to preach in Youth for Christ meetings than any other place, as the power of the Holy Spirit is felt so much.”<sup>6</sup>

Faithful youth workers always have embraced one another with humility, caring little about who received the credit. David Chow<sup>7</sup> opens his book *No More Lone Rangers* recounting the movie *Remember the Titans* in which Danzel Washington plays a football coach who galvanizes his team amid racial conflict to win the state championship. Teamwork and unity win the day in football and ministry. The *Apostles Creed* reminds us of the Trinitarian nature of God and the triune community we are called to foster.

Mike Yaconelli proclaimed: “To be effective youth workers, we have to be real—not perfect, whole, together, complete or competent—but real. We do not need to be afraid to show others we are imperfect. We should not fear exposing our messiness.”<sup>8</sup>

Authenticity requires us to teach the whole counsel of God—even the messy passages of Scripture. Authentic youth workers are great listeners and care more about entering a student’s story than fixing his or her problem. To be authentic, we also must be humble, willing to admit we don’t know all the answers but are willing to work through issues.

About 60 years ago, youth ministry pioneers had the audacity to be creative and experiment with new ideas while remaining teachable and righteous before God. Trusting the Holy Spirit to guide them in ministry, this principle of authenticity served them well.

With the same spirit Youth Specialties (1969) and Group Publishing (1971) were created to provide resources for youth leaders in churches. Youth Specialties founders Mike Yaconelli and Wayne Rice, who also founded *YouthWorker Journal*, used the resources they had developed with Youth for Christ to bring relationally driven, Christ-centered, biblically based youth ministry to their churches and immediately began sharing their ideas with other youth workers through their Ideas books.

Similarly, Thom Schultz started a youth ministry resource exchange through his *Group* newsletter and in the course of the next decade, youth ministry grew exponentially through the resources, seminars and conventions offered by Youth Specialties<sup>9</sup> and Group.<sup>10</sup> For 40 years, these organizations have trumpeted the *High School Musical* theme song, “We’re All in This Together!”

Transformation always has been at the heart of evangelical youth ministry. Strommen’s research found this to be as true today as in the past.<sup>11</sup> Call it what you will: evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation or Christian education. The bottom line is transforming lives with the message of God’s grace. Transformation always begins with compassion for teenagers and a passion to introduce them to the life-giving message of the gospel. Faithful youth workers for decades have worked tirelessly to communicate the Word of God clearly and engage students in formative experiences.

If our aim is to bring kids into the presence of Jesus Christ, then one focus is to reach kids who are currently outside the presence of Jesus Christ. These kids can be found inside and outside the church. We don’t need to look far to find them; they are everywhere. The desire to

#### 4. Genuine Relationships

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved in the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*).

Big rallies is one way to reach youth. One other style of youth ministry emerged in 1930s through Evelyn McClusky of Portland, Ore., who began teaching the Bible conversationally, using storytelling.

For McClusky, the Bible was a storybook filled with the great dramas of God and His people. She assumed her students had yet to encounter these dramas in any meaningful way and mesmerized young people as she recounted the grand narrative of Scripture. Never mounting the stage of a youth rally, she gathered young people in the intimate atmosphere of her living room for what became the Miracle Book Club Movement. This conversational style of teaching and relational style of ministry was in stark

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#### 3. Transforming Lives

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here” (2 Cor. 5:17).

While Francis Clark’s Christian Endeavor movement was established on a firm foundation of biblical teaching and an unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ, most denominational youth societies of the early 1900s drifted from those principles and began to emphasize leadership training and the uniqueness of their denominational positions.

Training up the next generation Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans or Baptists became more important than raising up the next generation of Christ followers. The non-denominational youth rallies and radio ministries of the ’30s and ’40s reclaimed the Christocentric biblical foundation of youth ministry making life-changing transformation central to its mission.

reach them has been a source of some of the most creative and effective programs in youth ministry history.

Of course, we are not simply in the salvation business. Conversion is merely the starting point of the long and costly journey of sanctification that as shepherds we must nurture through the community of believers.

This dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship has plagued youth ministry for ages, and perhaps in the 21st century we will overcome this debate with a more holistic view. You can’t have one without the other; they are interdependent, and only together do they truly fulfill the Great Commission. The truth is that “the aims of youth work are no different than the aims of the local church.”<sup>12</sup> If God is not transforming lives through our ministry, then perhaps we are not doing ministry at all.

contrast to the youth rallies marked by brazen preaching to massive crowds.

McClusky’s clubs spread across the country like wildfire, attracting the attention of Jim Rayburn who became a Miracle Book Club leader in Dallas, Texas, before launching Young Life in 1940. Rayburn mastered the art of conversational preaching and quickly abandoned youth rally programs in favor of a community-centered youth club that was larger than a Miracle Book Club yet smaller than a youth rally.

The clubs were and continue to be large enough to establish a critical mass that provides energy and enthusiasm, yet small enough to ensure the development of personal relationships. Even Youth for Christ, the king of the youth rally movement, established clubs to teach students the importance of personal evangelism and discipleship. As the large rallies gave way to the club movement, in

Youth for Christ numerous additional club type organizations sprang up.

Based on the incarnational model of Christ and a Trinitarian view of God, youth workers for 75 years have valued relationships and community as the primary context of transformation. To this day, the Young Life leadership manual declares the importance of genuine relationships. "Ideally, we go to young people for the same reason Christ came to humanity: to reveal God to them with no strings attached. To love them in order to get the opportunity to preach to them is a string. We should love them because God loves them and wants to love them through us."<sup>13</sup> Developing avenues of relational connection has been a timeless principle of youth ministry.

Doug Fields<sup>14</sup> observes that we are surrounded by relationships and strives to foster community through ministry. "Relationships are the backbone of all our values."<sup>15</sup> Teenagers have a deep desire for community and a strong appetite for relationships. Their faith formation is a "complex journey, and adolescents need someone who will walk alongside them as long as it takes."<sup>16</sup>

There have been times in our history when we have abused relationship—even out of seemingly good intentions. Thankfully, Andy Root<sup>17</sup> has offered an essential course correction that will help youth workers in the 21st century relate to students and families with the highest level of integrity.

Why have the student breakfasts mentioned earlier transcended time? Because they are highly relational, and relational ministry has been the hallmark of youth ministry since the mid-30s. When all else fails in ministry, take some kids to breakfast.

### Beacons of Hope

I live just a few miles from the Atlantic Ocean, where lighthouses mark our rocky coastline. The lights have been there for decades serving as beacons to ships whose vision at times is diminished by the fog.

Likewise, these foundational principals of purpose, authenticity, transformation and relationships have stood the test of time and continue to serve as beacons of light when the fog has settled on our ministries. **YWJ**

**MARK CANNISTER** is a Professor of Christian ministries at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts.

### NOTES

- 1 For a complete history of youth ministry see: Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010)
- 2 Mike Yaconelli, *The Heart of Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) video.
- 3 Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) chapters 2-4.
- 4 Merton Strommen, Karen Jones, & Dave Rahn, *Youth Ministry That Transforms*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), chapter 4.
- 5 Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), chapter 5.
- 6 Mel Larson, *Youth for Christ: Twentieth Century Wonder*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947), p.50.
- 7 David Chow, *No More Lone Rangers*, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2003).
- 8 Mike Yaconelli, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p.33.
- 9 YouthSpecialties.com
- 10 Group.com
- 11 Merton Strommen, Karen Jones, & Dave Rahn, *Youth Ministry That Transforms*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), chapter 4.
- 12 Lee Vukich and Steve Vandegriff, *Timeless Youth Ministry*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2002), p.202.
- 13 *Leadership I Handbook*, (Colorado Springs: YoungLife, 2010).
- 14 Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) chapters 13.
- 15 Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) p.235.
- 16 Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) p.189.
- 17 Andy Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) and *Relationships Unfiltered* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

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