

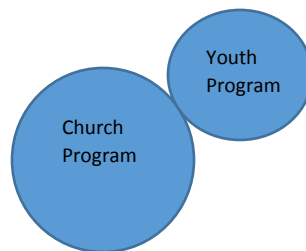
Youth Director Letter – FPC Newsletter
November 2016

Last month, I began re-reading Mark DeVries' book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*. It is my attempt to be sure we are on the best path to raising our youth to be mature Christians. The more we know, the more we can support all of the youth in our church family, and the more we can expect from them. I ended my article with a challenge to see more youth in worship on a regular basis.

This month, I read that the DeVries' (and many others) believe the root reason for our inability to lead our young people to mature Christian adulthood is that our culture and our churches have systematically isolated young people from the very relationships that are most likely to lead them to maturity. He says, "young people grow to maturity in general, and to maturity in Christ in particular, by being around people who exhibit such maturity themselves." He points out a study that revealed teenagers spend less than 7% of their waking hours with any adults, while spending approximately half of their time with their peers.* And this was YEARS before smartphones!! When our young people are around adults, they are often being entertained or taught or directed by adults. There is often little dialogue or conversation allowing for youth to simply be with adults and share conversations. As we know, their schedules are so packed that even if adults were available there would be little opportunity to spend time with them.

Harvard psychiatrist Armand Nicholi found that American parents spend less time with their children than do parents in any other country in the world. Sixty years ago, families worked and ate together by necessity. Teenagers and parents had little choice but to spend hours and hours together. As a result, young people couldn't avoid observing and listening in on the adult world, giving youth exposure that laid a natural track into adulthood.

So how do churches do in connecting the age groups? Well, for several generations, churches isolated our youth from the rest of the church and it hasn't done them or our churches any favors. We call it the "one-eared Mickey Mouse" and it looks like this:



So how do churches contribute to the gap between youth and adults? Well, some churches have youth gatherings separate from the rest of the church on Sunday evenings. Some churches have separate youth worship services altogether. In worship, youth sit separate from their parents (e.g.) in the balcony. Youth go on youth mission trips with only a handful of adults. There are separate youth budgets, youth rooms, youth choirs, youth conferences, youth retreats, youth worship services, youth ministers and on and on.

DeVries' is right to observe that "when leaders in American churches began to see teenagers' growing disinterest with the church, they responded like a good mechanic: isolate and fix. Church leaders assumed that by isolating the youth department into its own independent subgroup, they could create a curriculum that would instill all the values necessary for youth to grow to mature Christian adulthood.

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But the Christian community is not a machine. In fact, the “solution” of isolation created a much worse problem.

“Because teenagers are an integral part of the *body* of Christ, perhaps we would be better off to approach this problem less as a mechanic would and more as a physician would. When an organ is removed from a living body, that organ dies, and often the body dies along with it. The same principle is true in the body of Christ. Teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood when they are connected to the total body of Christ, not isolated from it.”

So what do we do at FPC to promote this youth isolation that is systemic in large churches? Upon reflection, I think we are facing this crisis head-on and are moving toward a true body of Christ. First, we eliminated Sunday evening youth groups and began LOGOS in 2012. Rather than one youth director (and her spouse) working with youth on Sunday evenings in a quiet church, we now have youth, children, and many adults in community for 3 hours on Wednesday evenings. Last night, we had eleven different adults sitting/playing/eating with our 26 youth. (That doesn't even include the LOGOS leadership, cook team, teachers, sitters, and many volunteers present with our Pre-K through 5th grade children!!!)

Second, our youth mission trips tend to be more like youth/adult mentor mission trips. I like to keep the youth to adult mentor ratio (especially on our international trips) closer to 2:1 or 1:1. It is amazing to watch and hear our youth interact with the adults on these trips. This change started in 2006 and hasn't changed. Now many youth do not want to go on a mission trip without Skip Watson. They appreciate his humor and his wisdom. That is what happens when you spend time talking and working together.

Third, the “youth in the balcony” thing during worship has all but disappeared. Youth sit with their families, because many of their families are engaged in LOGOS on Wednesday nights. (Youth are no longer only coming to church on Sunday nights to be alone with other youth.) Families are sharing experiences and are continuing to share these experiences in worship too.

Fourth, every year since 2007 our church has participated in the Montreat Worship & Music Conference at Montreat. The first year we had about 9 youth, 4 children, and 9 adults. And we quickly discovered the how much we valued the community that was created every year. We have attended this conference every year with as many as 55 participants. Our lodging has evolved from 1 to 3 homes and now we are all in one lodge. Yes, ages 3 and up all in one lodge. This past summer, we had 19 adults, 11 youth and 6 children participate in the conference. And for one week, we live in community, break bread and worship together. Instead of quickly talking before or after any given Sunday worship, we spend 7 uninterrupted days getting to know one another. That makes a difference when we come back to Lexington. Relationships have formed, communities have been created and we are a stronger church because of it.

Are we perfect? No, but we are working on reconnecting all of our age groups to the total body of Christ. That is community. That is church.

See you in church,

Kelly

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Source: DeVries, Mark, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, p. 35-44.

*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson, *Being Adolescent: Conflict and Growth in the Teenage Years* (New York: BasicBooks, 1984) quoted in Quentin J. Schultze, *Winning Your Kids Back from the Media* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994). P. 49.

The one-eared Mickey Mouse. Stuart Cummings-Bond, "The One-Eared Mickey Mouse," *Youthworker*, Fall 1989, p. 76.