

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF A CONGREGATION'S YOUTH  
MINISTRY IS PASTOR-TEEN RELATIONSHIPS

by

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Master of Divinity degree

Professor Bill J. Tackmier, Advisor

Approved at Mequon, Wisconsin, on April 4, 2012

Prof. Bill J. Tackmier  
Advisor's Signature

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DEDICATED TO:

Pastor Earle Treptow, who gave me the opportunity to taste both success and failure in youth ministry during my vicar year.

And to the young men and women who I had the privilege of serving in Colorado, who ignited in me a love for teen ministry, who allowed me to build relationships with them, and who became my friends.

Thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Why is youth ministry so difficult in today's culture? Why do so many congregations' youth ministries sputter out and fail? Why can't youth ministers seem to be able to get their youth active in the life of their congregations? Why do our congregations lose so many of their teenage members after confirmation? These questions plague many pastors who have invested countless hours of their ministry trying to make it successful, only to see it fail.

This paper will seek to show that the relationships developed by a pastor with the teenagers in his congregation will give his youth ministry the strongest chance to succeed, thrive, and affect the lives of the teens under its care.

This paper will show the biblical background for relationship-based ministry, why these relationships are so important for today's teenagers, and how pastors can begin to initiate this type of ministries in their own congregations.

By no means is this paper a cure-all for all the difficulties and challenges facing youth ministry in today's world, but it is meant to start the discussion of how we can begin to repair this area of ministry which is sputtering out and dying in many congregations.

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## **1. Introduction**

A recent seminary graduate finds himself in his first call; it is an established congregation with a membership made up primarily of middle-age families. There is a small group of teenagers in the congregation, but the church has never been able to start and establish a successful youth ministry.

But all of that is going to change. This young man enters into his first call with a spring in his step and a zeal for the ministry—especially the youth ministry that would flourish under his care. He arrived at his new call and immediately began to make plans. The new pastor planned his first youth group outing for that coming weekend and put sign-up sheets in the narthex. He searched through the church directory finding and memorizing all the names of the teenage sheep which he would have the privilege of shepherding. Sunday morning came and the pastor greeted them all with a big smile. He made sure they knew there would be a teen Bible class between services and invited all fourteen of the teens.

The early service ended, Bible class began, but only three teens sat in front of him. Those three that did show up were quiet and reserved; the class did not go well. This became the model for his Sunday morning Bible classes over the next weeks and his outings didn't fare much better. What had the young pastor done wrong? What had he missed that caused all his well-laid plans to fail?

This same story repeats itself in different places in different congregations in different denominations. This raises many questions: Why are our youth ministries failing? What are pastors doing wrong? How can we better serve the teenagers in our congregations? How can we offer successful and meaningful youth ministries that our teens will utilize and from which they will benefit? If we are to successfully minister to the youth in our congregations, these are the questions that must be answered.

In my studies and in my personal experience, I have found that the key, the most important aspect of youth ministry, is relationships. Before the youth minister can be a pastor to the youth in his congregation, he must be a friend—he must build relationships with them. There must be trust. There must be a feeling of comfort. There must be a relationship.

## 2. Scriptural basis

### 2.1 The Incarnation of Christ

Before we can begin to minister to a child of God, we need to have a desire to save that soul. We need to see that person as a redeemed child of God and love them the way that God loves them—without question and without fail. This is the type of love that characterized the entire ministry of Christ. Jesus understood the importance of relationships and he conducted his entire ministry with these relationships in mind. To understand this, a person needs to look no further than the incarnation itself. Jesus chose to take on flesh and stand among the humans he wanted to save.<sup>1</sup>

However, even as the true Son of God stood among sinful human beings, he wasn't the aloof and standoffish guru who distanced himself from mere mortals. He was born of a virgin and placed in a manger.<sup>2</sup> He lived his life as the humble son of a carpenter. He walked the streets and alleyways of ancient Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

As true God, Jesus deserved to rule; sinful human beings should have been bowing down before him and pleading with him for mercy, but Christ didn't come to rule. The true Son of God came to serve. He loved sinners so much that he chose a life of humility<sup>4</sup> and willingly sacrificed his life so that all people would have eternal life through him.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' incarnation was the ultimate act of love. He chose to take on flesh, to stand among human beings and develop relationships with them, out of love. He chose to be born under the law to redeem those under the law.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus didn't humble himself and take on flesh because sinful human beings deserved to be rewarded for all their good deeds; He took on flesh because of his great love. Jesus took on flesh because he knew that sinners were doomed to an eternity in the fires of hell without him.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:14a

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:4-7

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:23

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:5-8

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 2:14

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 4:4,5



But there is more to the incarnation than just this. When we look deeper, we see that Jesus took on flesh because he understood exactly what human beings needed. Humans are social creatures that need to feel, touch, see, and experience. They need to be able to work, live, and socialize with one another.

This is why God created Eve in the first place. In fact, the whole creation account can be used to show how important relationships are in the everyday lives of people<sup>7</sup>. God knew that it wasn't good for man to be alone, but he wanted Adam to see it, too. For this reason, he brought all of the animals before Adam so he could name them. As they passed before Adam and he gave them their names, Adam started to realize what God had already known: he was alone; every other creature the Lord had made enjoyed life with a suitable and fitting mate, but not Adam.

When Adam realized he was alone, God caused him to fall into a deep sleep and from the rib God removed from his side, God formed the woman, the perfect counterpart who would have a perfect relationship with the man. The first words of poetry in Scripture show that Adam realized who this person was and what God had now done for him. "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Ge 2:23).

Jesus knew what God knew; he knew what God led Adam to recognize: Mankind needs relationships. Humans need to be able to love. That love was why Jesus took on flesh. He took on flesh and chose to love those around him through personal relationships because, as their substitute, he knew that was what they needed in order to hear the gospel message.

He took on flesh, he developed relationships, and he lived and died, for one reason: love.

## **2.2 The Ministry of Christ**

This love affected and permeated everything Jesus did while on this earth. He truly was Immanuel, God with us<sup>8</sup>, but he never acted like he was better than others. He attended

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:18-25

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 1:23

weddings and partook of cultural norms<sup>9</sup>; he formed friendships and interacted with all those around him.

Jesus' mission was to spread the gospel, to show the world that he was the Messiah promised since the fall into sin, but the relationships he formed played a fundamental role in his ministry. Jesus had a ministry to conduct while on earth, but he chose to form relationships; he chose to befriend sinners because he knew that was what they needed and he knew that would be a crucial aspect to his ministry.

Jesus never feigned interest in those around him, but he truly cared about people and showed them love and kindness at all times. The sinner's interests and concerns became his. He was close to people and shared in their emotions: their joys, fears, aspirations, and even their sadness.<sup>10</sup>

There is no shortage of passages in the Gospels showing the relationships that Jesus enjoyed while walking this earth. The gospel of Luke speaks about Jesus staying in the house of his friends Mary and Martha while in Bethany.<sup>11</sup> He spent time in their home eating with them, conversing with them, and teaching them. Jesus didn't do this because he needed a place to stay or because he thought that this was a necessary part of his ministry that he would have to suffer through; he stayed with them because they were his friends. Jesus stayed with them because he had developed a personal relationship with them and he cared for them as much as they cared for him. Jesus developed a personal relationship with them so that they could know their Savior on a personal level and so that through him they could come to a knowledge of the truth.<sup>12</sup>

It was because of this relationship that Mary and Martha would later run to Jesus when their brother, Lazarus, fell ill and died.<sup>13</sup> They came to Jesus, first, because he was their friend and they had developed a relationship with him, but they also came because they believed that he could do something to help their family.

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<sup>9</sup> John 2:1-11

<sup>10</sup> John 11:1-16

<sup>11</sup> Luke 10:38-42

<sup>12</sup> 1 Timothy 2:3-6

<sup>13</sup> John 11:1-44

The sisters sent messengers to Jesus saying, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”<sup>14</sup> Gary Baumler writes in the People’s Bible on John, “The Greek word used for ‘love’ was one that stressed the friendship between the two. ‘Jesus, your good friend is sick.’ It was, implicitly, a simple prayer: ‘Jesus, we have a problem. We know you will help us.’”<sup>15</sup>

The Greek word used was φιλέω. This word, in essence, means a brotherly love. It is not unlike the Greek word ἀγαπάω which we use to describe the perfect love of God, but the word used in John denotes a love that comes from an interpersonal relationship. This love that Jesus had for Lazarus and his sisters, and the love they in-turn had for Jesus was a love that came from a relationship. “It is used for the love of spouses, of parents and children, of employers and servants, of friends, and of gods and those favored by them.”<sup>16</sup>

However, Jesus’ personal ministry didn’t stop with those who were considered his close friends. He also ate, drank, and associated with those people who were considered the lowest members of society—tax collectors, prostitutes, and those who were diseased. Why? Jesus formed these relationships because he had come to seek and to save what was lost.<sup>17</sup> He came to shower his love down upon those who had nothing else. Jesus came to form a lasting relationship with those who had been shunned by society and left to die alone. He came to love those who the rest of the world had written off. Jesus came so that they could know their Savior.

Many times, Jesus proclaimed his teaching to vast crowds of people, but often his ministry was interpersonal—one-on-one with a sinner who needed to hear his words and his call to follow. When a rich young man ran up to Jesus looking for answers, Jesus took the time to talk with him, to teach him, to lead him to the truth.<sup>18</sup> Jesus did this out of love. Mark wrote, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mk 10:21a).

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<sup>14</sup> John 11:3b

<sup>15</sup> Gary P. Baumler, *John, The People's Bible* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 1262.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 19:10

<sup>18</sup> Mark 10:17-31

He spent one-on-one time with the woman at the well, talking with her, getting to know her, and teaching her about the truth.<sup>19</sup> This woman was a Samaritan; because of her nationality she and Jesus should have been enemies. The woman even said as much, “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?’ (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)” (Jn 4:9).

If that wasn't enough of a deterrent for Jesus, the woman was also an adulteress. She would not have been accepted among her own people. She most likely would not have been welcome in her own town, but it is with this woman that Jesus sits down and speaks to one-on-one. When you look at Jesus' words, you will see what he is doing. He's building a relationship with her. He's finding out about her life and using the Word of God to help her with her issues. Granted, Jesus has a pretty impressive advantage because he could do this quicker than anyone else because he knows all things. For us, mere mortals, this will take much longer but the pattern to follow is there. Develop a relationship with a person, get to know them, build up the trust so that you can minister to that person when the time comes. In the end, Jesus developed this relationship with this woman for one reason: so that she might drink the water of life and never be thirsty again.<sup>20</sup>

However, during Jesus' time on this earth, he didn't just form relationships with outsiders; he also spent time forming relationships with the twelve men who would be his closest friends and allies during his ministry.

Jesus chose twelve men to follow him and learn from him on a daily basis in a very personal way. Why would he have done this? As the true Son of God, he could very easily have taken care of all of his work on his own; he most certainly didn't need the help. However, Jesus knew that there would be a time when he would no longer walk the earth in bodily form. He knew that someone would have to carry the proverbial torch after he was gone.

So Jesus took these 12 men under his wing. He trained them and taught them how to conduct ministry. Jesus lived with them day-in and day-out. They were his brothers in the ministry and his brothers in faith. Jesus loved his twelve apostles, and they loved him. His apostles even confessed that they were ready to die for their teacher, their friend, and their

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<sup>19</sup> John 4:1-26

<sup>20</sup> John 4:13

Lord.<sup>21</sup> This very personal relationship they had with their Lord meant something to them, and they would be forever blessed because of it.

God could have easily chosen twelve random men and taught them everything they needed to know through direct revelation, but he chose to reveal these things through a man who could form personal relationships with them. He gave the apostles the Word made flesh so that they could see the importance of relationships. God gave them Jesus so that their human needs for interaction and socialization could be fulfilled. He gave them Jesus as a model for how ministry was to be carried out—in a personal way where relationships matter.

Jesus tried to take every chance he could to develop and nurture this personal relationship with his apostles, often taking them to a quiet place, away from the hustle and bustle of the ministry so that their own faith could be strengthened and they could learn from their Lord in a personal and private way.<sup>22</sup>

But the question remains: Why? Why would God send his Son to sinners who, by nature, are his enemies? Why would Jesus Christ willingly give up the full use of his divine powers to live a human life as the son of a poor carpenter from Nazareth? Based on our human logic, God's plan doesn't make sense, but God didn't do these things because they were logical.

The answer to all of those questions is love. God loved his creation enough to save them from the clutches of sin, death, and the devil. Jesus Christ loved the world enough to humble himself and take on flesh so that sinners might be able to have a personal relationship with him and see and witness their Savior in the flesh. Jesus humbled himself and took on flesh so the entire world could find salvation through his holy and precious body and blood.

### **2.3 Jesus' Command for Ministry**

This was the way Jesus conducted his ministry and he expected nothing less from his disciples. In John 15, Jesus is teaching his disciples, training them for a time when he would no longer be with them in bodily form. There, he tells them to model their ministries after his own.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your

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<sup>21</sup> Luke 22:33

<sup>22</sup> Mark 6:31

joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other (Jn 15:9–17).

Jesus entire ministry, everything he did, revolved around this one word: love. He loved the world enough to take on flesh. He loved humans enough to live with them, form relationships with them, and include them in his ministry. But his greatest act of love was that he gave his life for those he loved. Everything Jesus did was built around the relationships that he had developed—around the love which he had for sinful human beings.

His desire for his disciples was that they do the same. They were to conduct their ministries with attitudes of love. They were to create and nurture their own relationships with the sinful people around them. They were to embrace the Lord's sheep because his desire was for everyone to be saved.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus' command for them was not that they simply stand up in front of a great crowd of people and remove themselves from the people's lives. Their ministries were to be like His; the apostles were to meet the people where they were at, to get to know them and spend time with them, to form relationships around Christ and his Word.

We can see throughout the New Testament that the disciples carried out their ministries in this way. The Apostle Peter was led by God to form a relationship with a centurion in the Italian Regiment named Cornelius.<sup>24</sup> It was against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him, but God led Peter to see that no man could be judged pure or impure. Every man, woman, and child is important in God's eyes and he wants them all to be saved. God wants them all to come into a relationship with Christ and those who serve him. The way that is to happen, the way humans are designed, is through personal relationships.

Philip, too, received a call from God to serve a lost soul in a very personal way.<sup>25</sup> An Ethiopian man wanted to know about the true God, but he couldn't understand what he was

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<sup>23</sup> John 1:7; 1 Timothy 2:3,4

<sup>24</sup> Acts 10

<sup>25</sup> Acts 8:26-40

reading in the words of the prophet Isaiah. So the Lord sent Philip to him, to develop a relationship with him, and to teach the man about his Lord and Savior. The Lord had placed Philip into that position, where he could speak to the Ethiopian in a one-on-one setting and develop a relationship with him. Through that relationship, the Ethiopian man came to faith that day and was baptized.

The Lord was powerful enough to know everything about the Ethiopian (who he was, where he was, what he was doing, etc.); He was powerful enough to come to Philip and tell him where to go; He was powerful enough to transport Philip from that place after the baptism. So, with all that power, why not just impart the knowledge of Scripture to him through a direct revelation? Well, quite simply, because it wasn't part of his plan. That day, he chose to use his servant, Philip, to develop a relationship with the Ethiopian and serve his soul by leading him to a knowledge of his Savior, Jesus Christ.

#### **2.4 The Ministry of the Apostle Paul**

The Apostle Paul's ministry was no different; he, too, followed Christ's command to serve the lost in a personal way. Paul had been called to be the missionary to the Gentile nations.<sup>26</sup> He wasn't only in one congregation working with the Lord's sheep, but Paul traveled the world, spreading the good news of the risen and ascended Lord. He came across large groups of people everywhere he went. Undoubtedly, there were more people than Paul could ever know personally or remember them by name, but he loved them nonetheless. It would have been very easy for Paul to pass through these cities, plant the churches, and never look back, never once developing personal relationships with the people there, but we never get that feeling when reading Paul's letters. In fact, through all of his letters it seems just the opposite.

With the love of Christ in mind, Paul built relationships everywhere he went. Countless times throughout Paul's writing we see him greeting the churches he started with loving words and endearing terms. He ends his first letter to the Corinthians with these words: "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen" (1 Co 16:24).

In the opening to his letter to the Philippians you can hear Paul's pastoral heart oozing through his words.

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<sup>26</sup> Acts 9:15

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (Php 1:3-11).

Paul didn't just go from place to place and never develop relationships or show love or care toward the people. All those whom Paul ministered to personally witnessed the love and care of Christ shining through him. Paul loved all those he came across and sought to bring them into a personal relationship with their Savior through the personal relationship he developed with each of them.

But Paul didn't just form relationships with those he was ministering to on a congregational level; he also invested the time, energy, and care to develop personal relationships with those around him. Paul could have gone from place to place simply speaking the gospel message and leaving, but he knew that for the message to take hold, relationships had to be formed. He knew how people worked and what they needed.

Paul had friends whom he had built relationships with and who helped him during his journeys. Two of these people were named Priscilla and Aquila. Paul spent time with them during his first missionary journey when he arrived in Corinth. He lived with them for the time he stayed there and spoke of them numerous times in his other writings. When Paul writes to the Romans he asks them to greet his two friends who risked their lives for him and for the spread of the gospel.<sup>27</sup> When he writes his first letter to the Corinthians, he sends greetings from his friends that have now established their own congregation.<sup>28</sup> When he writes his second letter to Timothy, he makes special mention of them in his closing greetings.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 16:3

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:19

<sup>29</sup> 2 Timothy 4:19



In all of this, we can see that these were more than just fellow workers in God's kingdom; they were more than Paul's fellow tent-makers who shared their home with him. Priscilla and Aquila were children of God with whom Paul had the privilege to develop relationships. They were his brother and sister in Christ, his friends who had the privilege of serving with Paul and joining him in his mission, putting their lives on the line for the sake of the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We can also see through Scripture that Paul was a firm believer in youth ministry. Paul understood exactly what it took to make his youth ministry thrive—personal relationships. Paul took the time to form close relationships with younger people, training them to be the missionaries of the future who would follow after him.

Paul took men like Barnabas and Timothy along on his missionary journeys. He understood that he could not carry out the gospel mission on his own; he needed helpers, more feet and mouths to proclaim the good news to the world. So he built these relationships, trained these men, and used them to carry out the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples.<sup>30</sup>

But more than just training up future missionaries, Paul was concerned with building up these young men in the gospel, in their personal relationship with Christ. He trained up young men like Titus, a probable convert to Christianity, to live lives dedicated to Christ and the mission which he gave to his Church. We see that Titus, a young man trained-up by Paul, became one his greatest and most trusted assets in ministry, assisting Paul in Corinth and in Crete.<sup>31</sup>

Paul understood the importance of building relationships to sustain and nurture his ministry. He built up young men who would follow in his footsteps. He formed relationships with fellow Christians so that his work could be sustained and the gospel could be spread without fail. But more importantly than all of this, he developed relationships with all those around him so that the gospel message of Christ could be spread and so that souls could come to a knowledge of their Savior and be redeemed through Him.

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:12,13; 7:6,7,13,14; 8:6,16,17; 12:18

## 2.5 Applications for our Ministry

So what do all of these examples mean for us, ministers of the gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? If this is the way Jesus and the Apostles chose to undertake their ministry, how can we expect to do anything less? By forfeiting the relationship building, this essential aspect of youth ministry, we not only hurt ourselves, but we also hurt the young men and women we have been called to serve. We may believe that we are serving them by organizing event after event or spending hours developing the perfect youth ministry theories, but is that what they really need? Is that the ministry model Christ would have us follow?

While these activities have their place in youth ministry, a youth minister cannot sit at his desk and expect his ministry to thrive. He needs to leave the safety of his office and enter the teenager's world just as Christ entered ours. He must be willing to meet them where they are at. He must be willing to be all things to all people,<sup>32</sup> especially the teens in his congregation.

We are sent onto their "turf." We must become accessible to them by intentionally placing ourselves in the midst of their subculture (1 Corinthians 5:9-12). In the same way that Jesus moved close enough to touch and be touched, so, too, we are called to minister to youth at close range. It is sobering to remember that the person who is close enough to be touched is also close enough to be vulnerable, hurt, abused, and even crucified.<sup>33</sup>

This is how we are to work. As ministers called to be shepherds of the Lord's youth, we have to go behind enemy lines, so to speak. This will not be easy. In fact, at times it will undoubtedly be painful, but if we want to have successful ministries with today's youth, it will be necessary. We can't just sit back and expect them to come to us if we haven't developed a relationship with them beforehand.

We have Christ living inside of us. If we are to be His representatives, we must make contact with people in a direct and intimate way (2 Corinthians 4:5-11). No place is off limits to us, and no individual or category of youth is outside the sphere of our concern. This means we must find them. The youth minister must be willing to go to the campus, to frequent local hangouts, to visit homes, to attend sporting events and concerts, to go anywhere there is an opportunity to meet with teenagers in natural ways.<sup>34</sup>

This may not be easy for many adults who don't have their own children at these events, but it is necessary. As the author points out, it won't be *easy*. It won't be painless like sitting

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22

<sup>33</sup> Doug Stevens, *Called to Care: Youth Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Stevens, 29.

behind a desk and working on a sermon. It will take work. It will involve possibly taking yourself out of your comfort zone. It will bring the possibility of being hurt, but it will also bring the possibility of great rewards.

Many people may think this is nonsense. They may say that this is the last thing that a teenager will want: an adult trying to be one of them. If that is what the adult is doing, those people would be right. Teenagers don't want an adult who is trying to be one of them. They don't want an adult who is trying to "fit in." Teens will spot this from a mile away and it will not reap rewards.

However, despite all the signs that may point to the contrary, today's teens want adults in their lives. They don't want someone pretending to be what he's not. They don't want someone who's trying to be one of them. They want someone who cares. They want someone who will listen to them, trust them, and be there for them when they're needed.

Contrary to what most adults think, middle adolescents *want* significant relationships with adults who care about them. When asked about this in various settings—one-on-one, in informal groups, or even in a large convention setting—students confirmed this assertion, and most seemed almost eager to have an adult friend. The difficulty comes when they attempt to reconcile this need with their perception of the lack of trustworthiness in adults.<sup>35</sup>

You see, it's not a lack of desire to have adult relationships, but a feeling of pain and failure when it comes to the relationships they've had in the past. If they've been hurt before by an adult, they won't quickly open themselves up to another adult relationship.

This is the attitude we have to work with. This is the barrier we have to break down. This is, as many people see it, the enemy territory we need to cross into. It won't be easy. It won't be painless. It's going to take a great deal of hard work, and we'll need to put ourselves on the line. However, if we do this—if we put ourselves out there—we will reap the rewards.

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<sup>35</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the world of today's teenagers*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 23-24.

### **3. The Importance of Youth Ministry in Today's Congregations**

#### **3.1 The Ever-Increasing Rift between Adult and Teen**

A common attitude among many adults is that teenagers are not a priority, but that they are a nuisance that needs to be dealt with. Studies have proven this point.

The disinterest of adults in the congregation in the church's teenagers can dishearten youth ministers. Adults too often have a stereotypical assumption that youth do not want meaningful relationships with a church's adults—an assumption that is dead wrong. Youth actually do want such relationships. Yet this erroneous (sic) perception, held also by even many of the teenagers' parents, is characteristic of our culture today.

Evidence of this is found in a 1997 national study entitled "Kids These Days: What Americans Think about the Next Generation." When asked to describe teenagers, two-thirds of the thousand adults surveyed came up with negative adjectives like rude, wild, and irresponsible. Only 37 percent believed that today's teenagers might eventually make this country a better place.<sup>36</sup>

It's no wonder that many youth ministries fail when this type of an attitude is prevalent in our world. I fear at times this attitude has also snuck into our churches among the members and the called workers. There is an ever-growing rift between the adults in our congregations and our teenagers. This, I believe, is the greatest threat and obstacle in the way of successful youth ministry in today's congregations.

This growing chasm between adults and teens isn't hard to see. There is a self-destructive cycle that rages between teens and adults. Adults retreat from teens because they don't understand them and they find teens to be standoffish and disrespectful. Teens retreat from adults because they think they're being treated as children and adults could never understand what they're going through. And so, as they retreat farther and farther from one another, the chasm grows, and the cycle continues.

Make no mistake about it; the pastor is just as affected by this as others. He, too, has to find a way to bridge the gap between adult and teen. In the teen's eyes, he is just another adult; he's no different than all the other adults that have failed them over the years.

With all of these issues raging in our congregations, it's no wonder teens aren't coming to events, Bible classes, or even worship. In a paper put out by the WELS Commission on Youth

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<sup>36</sup> Strommen, Merton; Jones, Karen E.; Rahn, Dave. *Youth Ministry That Transforms: A comprehensive analysis of the hopes, frustrations, and effectiveness of today's youth workers*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 53.

Discipleship, the paper listed one of the major reasons that youth are leaving the church as the feeling that young adults just don't matter in their congregations.

“Young adults don't count” appears to be another key area where pastors believe that 14 to 24 year olds are lost. There were significant comments surrounding the fact that this age group is not engaged or made to feel that their opinions count; there is a feeling they (young adults) are not respected.<sup>37</sup>

If this great chasm exists in our congregation between adult and teen, how can we expect our teenagers to want to remain in the congregation? How can we expect them to remain in a church where they have no relationships outside of their immediate family? If they can't find what they're looking for in our churches, I promise you they will find it somewhere else, whether that is within the walls of another church body or outside of the church altogether, because teens do understand their need for relationships and they will look to fill that void wherever possible. “Adolescence is about relationships. Friends are central to youth. If enduring friendships are not built, youths will gravitate to other places where they can be established.”<sup>38</sup>

This chasm does exist; it is the elephant in the room that no one wants to acknowledge, but in order for youth ministry in a congregation to thrive, it will have to be acknowledged, understood, and dealt with so that the Lord's sheep, both young and old, can be fed. And the only way we are going to deal with this problem once and for all is to build pastor-teen relationships.

### **3.2 The Ever-Growing List of Difficulties Facing Teens**

“You may think you know, but you have no idea.” This is a common phrase, but it fits very well when talking about the life of a teenager. An adult may think they know what a teen is going through, and, to an extent, they might, but to say that they know exactly what a teen is going through is like telling a veteran that you know exactly how he's feeling while suffering from PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) when you've never been to combat. You may think you know, but you have no idea.

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<sup>37</sup> WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship. “Why Young People Leave WELS: A summary of findings from the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship National Survey of Pastors and Young Adults.” Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Connect Website Online Essay File: <https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/researchresources/Documents/Why%20Young%20People%20Leave%20WELS%20%28Summary%29.pdf>. February 5, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Strommen, 72.

An adult can't fully know what is going on in the life of a teenager. Some things will undoubtedly stay the same from generation to generation, but multitudes of things change from year to year as well. Adults need to understand that things have changed since they were teenagers.

I encourage those who are over thirty and who hold any illusion that the high school they went to is similar to the one today's students attend to visit the school, walk the halls, and listen to the students talk to one another at lunch or during breaks. Unless you have stayed in close touch with the changing adolescent culture, you will most certainly be struck by the fact that the world you inhabited and the experiences you had are but a distant, never-to-be-reclaimed memory.<sup>39</sup>

Things are not the same. They're never going to be the same. What adults experienced in their teen years is not exactly the same as what today's teens are experiencing. There will likely be similarities, but the differences will abound.

When adults begin to understand this, they have taken the first step to building relationships with the teens around them. Yes, they may understand the peer pressure, the desire to fit in, and some of the stresses the teens of today have to struggle with, but there are different struggles that today's teens struggle with that the adults in their lives have never had to deal with. Adults can't know exactly what a teen is feeling or what they are going through.

So what does that mean for the adults in their lives? How are adults supposed to interact with teens if they can't fully understand them? Les Parrott answers that question well.

The best way to avoid stepping on adolescents' toes is to put yourself in their sneakers. I don't know who said that first, but it's surely true. Empathy lets struggling adolescents know you hear their words, understand their thoughts, and sense their feelings. This does not mean you necessarily understand all that is wrong with them. It means you understand what they feel and think. Empathy is void of judgment and says, "If I were you, I would act as you do; I understand why you feel the way you feel."<sup>40</sup>

As Parrott points out, adults don't need to understand teens. If that were necessary, every adult having anything to do with teenagers would be in a lot of trouble. What adults need to do is be there for their teens—listening to them, empathizing with their needs and struggles, and refraining from judging them. Trying to put themselves in the teens' shoes in this way, even if

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<sup>39</sup> Chap Clark, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Parrott, Les III. *Helping the Struggling Adolescent: A Guide to Thirty-six Common Problems for Counselors, Pastors and Youth Workers, Updated and expanded.* (Zondervan, 2000), 32.

the adults don't understand everything, will win them an audience and will start to build that relationship of trust that the youth ministry will be built on.

A study produced by the Barna Group put it in this way:

Understanding the tensions that kids are wrestling with enables an adult to connect with a child at a deeper level. Acknowledging the challenges, relating teaching to the issues they face, and even praying more specifically for these young people are ways of retaining and even deepening the relationship while providing tangible assistance to each child.<sup>41</sup>

Helping these kids means understanding that they are facing incredible amounts of challenges in their lives. However, it also means understanding that times have changed. The world for today's teenagers is dominated by social media—Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, online gaming communities, etc. It isn't a stretch to say that many teens have more meaningful relationships online than they do in a face-to-face setting.

Some people argue that online friendships are little more than casual acquaintances--high tech pen pals--not real friendships. Without the social presence of face-to-face interaction, they surmise, the relationships simply can't be as meaningful. Geeks may treasure them, but the rest of humanity needs the closeness and immediacy of "being there." The research, however, is beginning to show that online friendships may be both more common, and far deeper than many supposed they could be, at least to the people involved in them.<sup>42</sup>

The world we are in revolves around social media. People are connected to their *networks* twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year. With most cell phones able to access these sites now on-the-go, whenever a person wants, these social networking sites begin to take an even greater hold on the world. If they're not on the social networks, they spend their time texting.

Nationally, roughly one-quarter of all ninth graders send text messages on a daily basis; by the time they reach graduation age, the number has doubled. It is not unheard of for an individual adolescent's monthly text quota to soar above ten thousand. It is not the thrill of typing with one's thumbs that keeps teenagers texting, but rather the chance to remain connected to one's peers at literally every waking hour—and sometimes in the middle of the night.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Barna Group. "Five Myths about Young Adult Church Droupouts." [www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts](http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts). January 31, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Wallace, Patricia. *The Psychology of the Internet* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), 134.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, Chap. *Hurt 2.0: Inside the world of today's teenagers* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2011), 161.

This type of social media—having the ability to be connected to your friends at all times and in all places—becomes a part of the teen’s life because for many, it represents a place where they can escape all the other problems they face in their lives. It is a place where they can connect with their friends to deal with these issues. But maybe even more important than that, these online relationships provide a certain type of anonymity, a certain security that can’t be found in *real life* relationships.

The construction of a personalized online ‘identity’ and the accumulation of ‘friends’ within one’s network are one and the same task. The disclosure, then, of personal information in cyberspace, while a significant risk, is the currency of intimacy among the adolescent, his or her cluster, and the greater adolescent world. For teenagers left starving for belonging by a fragmented adult culture that has abandoned them, the potential dangers of the internet are negligible compared to the perceived benefits.<sup>44</sup>

But what are the problems they are trying to escape? What are the problems they are trying to deal with? Well, for teens, that list is endless. Divorce rates that continue to climb, the growing trend of drug and alcohol use among high school students, a culture all around them that screams sex at every turn, the ever-increasing importance of looking like the stars in the media, the escalating rate of teenage suicide, peer pressure—these are just a few of the challenges that today’s teenagers face on a daily basis. These are the challenges that today’s youth ministers also need to face on a daily basis. To do that, a youth minister needs to try to understand these challenges.

One of the biggest challenges facing today’s teens, more than ever before, is the epidemic of broken families. Divorce rates climbed to an all-time high in the 1980s, but since then they have plateaued. Statistics have even begun to show that divorce rates are down in the last 30 years. “The **divorce rate** in 2005 (per 1,000 people) was 3.6 -- the **lowest rate since 1970**, and down from 4.2 in 2000 and from 4.7 in 1990. (The peak was at 5.3 in 1981, according to the *Associated Press*.)”<sup>45</sup>

While the claim that half of all marriages will end in divorce seems to be over-exaggerated, the rate of divorce in our society is still very high.

One of the latest reports about divorce was released this year by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). It is based on a 1995 federal study of nearly 11,000 women

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<sup>44</sup> Clark, 162.

<sup>45</sup> Divorce Magazine. “U.S. Divorce Statistics.” <http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.shtml>. March 27, 2012.



ages 15-44. It predicted that one-third of new marriages among younger people will end in divorce within 10 years and 43 percent within 15 years.<sup>46</sup>

But don't think that things have gotten invariably better since the 1980s. As many experts have found, the lower divorce rates may just be reflecting the current pessimism that many people feel toward the institution of marriage. The modern society we live in places less and less emphasis on the importance of marriage. We see that attitude reflected in the homes of families all over the country, even in our own congregations.

Marriage rates have plummeted to a forty-year low. Couples are having a harder time achieving long-term wedded bliss. Young women are increasingly pessimistic about their chances for successful marriage. Americans are now less likely to marry than ever before, and those who do marry seem to be less happy than in previous decades. And 50 percent of all marriages are projected to end in divorce or permanent separation.<sup>47</sup>

God's model for marriage is forgotten and marriages end on a whim because adults become selfish. The worst part of this is that the children are the ones who suffer most from all of this.

Parental fighting is a consistent harbinger of adjustment problems for children. Children from high-conflict homes are at risk for a wide range of emotional and behavior disturbances, interpersonal problems, and impairments in thought processes. ... Thus, marital conflict as a core feature of family life has major implications for the socialization of children.<sup>48</sup>

Their home life, their place of security, their refuge has been shattered. What is the result of all of this? Teenagers who are broken are entering into our congregations, our youth groups, and our Bible studies. This is a major reason for the critical importance of pastor-teen relationships in a congregation's youth ministry because many teens aren't getting those adult relationships at home.

Even if their parents are still together, many times they can't possibly live up to the expectations that their teenage children put on them. Time and time again, teens are disappointed by their parents and, many times, that has nothing to do with their parents doing anything wrong.

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<sup>46</sup> Branches Communications, Inc. 2012. "Divorce." Truthorfiction.com. <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/d/divorce.htm>. March 27, 2012

<sup>47</sup> Parrott, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Cummings, Mark. *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 11.

But time and again, experience with parents falls short of this expectancy. So the child makes some jarring discoveries. “They won’t always be there when I have need. I am on my own.” “They can’t always protect me from harm. Bad things will happen to me.” “They won’t always make right decisions. I will sometimes pay for their mistakes.” “They won’t always know what to do. I must figure life out for myself.” One painful part of growing up is giving up believing parents can provide security.<sup>49</sup>

It is in this type of environment that we are asking our children to grow, to find a personal identity, to grow into responsible young men and women who will be leaders in our churches, our communities, and our families. But that quest is often not an easy one.

The quest for identity is scary. Somewhere between twelve and twenty years of age, adolescents are forced to choose once and for all what their identity is to be. It is a formidable task. Uncertain which of their mixed emotions are really their true feelings, they are pushed to make up their minds. Their confusion is complicated further when they begin to guess what others, whose opinions they care about, want them to be.<sup>50</sup>

We ask these young men and women to make some very critical choices at this point in their lives, but they are still trying to find themselves. Many of the choices that teens make during this period will affect the rest of their lives.

With this in mind, a teen’s adult relationships become even more important because, as Parrott continues, who teens are trying to emulate, who they want and are striving to be are the people in their lives who they know and respect.

The successful formation of self-identity follows a typical pattern. Teens identify with people they admire. Whether in real life or through magazines and TV, they emulate the characteristics of people they want to be like. By the end of adolescence, if all goes as it should, these identifications merge into a single identity that incorporates and alters previous identifications to make a unique and coherent whole.<sup>51</sup>

But for many without a stable relationship at home, without a relationship with their congregation’s pastor, who are they looking to emulate? They try to be like the stars they see on TV, in the movies, or in the magazines. They try to be like their friends, the people they spend every day with, but many times, their friends are just as lost and confused as they are.

It’s no wonder that when teens are trying to be like these people they find themselves surrounded by drugs, alcohol, and sex. They find themselves striving to be skinnier, sexier, or

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<sup>49</sup> Pickhardt, Carl. “Adolescence and the Myth of Independence: Adolescents achieve independence with triumph and regret.” *Psychology Today*. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/em/84394>. February 16, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Parrott, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Parrott, 17-18.

wealthier by whatever means necessary. They will do anything to make themselves better in the eyes of those around them, because for them, many times, what others think of them is more important than what they think about themselves.

All of us want to please others. We want to be liked, respected, and accepted. The people around us have a substantial influence on what we do, think, and say. And it's a good thing. Our desire to accommodate ourselves to the group norm is one of the most civilizing forces in society. But it also has the potential to create a great deal of personal conflict and loss of self-esteem. This harm is perhaps greater for adolescents than for any other group.<sup>52</sup>

This quest for identity while traversing the raging waters of the teenage years becomes one of the greatest challenges that young men and women will face in their lives, but how many of them will face that challenge on their own because they just don't have anyone they can talk to about these things? How many of them will buckle under the pressure of trying to be someone they're not, someone they don't want to be, because they've never had anyone to share their feelings and frustrations with?

Looking back at my teens years, I thank God that I had the support system to help me make good decisions and to give me the encouragement and courage to follow my dreams and be what I wanted to be. But how many kids will grow up never knowing that type of support and love?

Looking at this list of challenges facing the modern-day teenager, being called to lead a group like that can be quite daunting—terrifying, in fact. But this is why the Lord calls us to serve them—because they have problems, because they need us, but more importantly, because they need what we have to offer.

### **3.3 The Teen's Ever-Growing Need for a Savior**

All of these different teen trials lead to the same conclusion: today's teenagers need to hear about Jesus Christ on a regular basis. Today's teens need the comfort, the truth, and the safety that can be found only in the words of Scripture. They need to hear the words of God's law cutting them to their core, reminding them of the times they have failed to live up to the perfect standards set by a holy God. But teens also need to hear the sweet soothing words of the

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<sup>52</sup> Parrott, 20.

Gospel; they need to hear that no matter what sins they have committed, Christ has forgiven them. He has removed those sins from them as far as the East is from the West.<sup>53</sup>

Teens need to be reminded that no matter how lonely they feel, no matter how stressful life seems to be, no matter how many people fail them, Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior now and for all eternity. He will not leave them. He will never prove to be unfaithful. Jesus will never look down upon them for wearing the wrong jeans or asking a silly question in class. He will never pressure them into doing something they know is wrong. Jesus will never lead them down crooked paths. During these turbulent and trying times, Christ is the greatest gift and best assurance we can give to the young men and women we are called to serve.

This gift of Christ is something that we have and is something that they need, but before we can expect the opportunity to share it with them on a personal level, we need to build relationships with them.

Please, don't misunderstand me. I am not downplaying the importance or the efficacy of the means of grace. The Word of God is powerful and it will accomplish what it sets out to do<sup>54</sup>—namely, to convert sinners of their sin and to reveal to them the salvation won by Jesus Christ. For this reason, like the Apostle Paul, we are not ashamed of the gospel because we know the power that it holds.<sup>55</sup>

However, as called ministers of the gospel, while we realize that we add nothing to the power of the gospel, we also know that we can put obstacles in the way of the gospel's saving message. As Christians, as called workers, we understand that faith comes from hearing the gospel; so that gospel needs to be proclaimed.<sup>56</sup> But by not building relationships, we may be unknowingly putting obstructions in the way of the saving gospel message.

Professor Richard Balge, in a paper written for the Wisconsin State High School Teachers' Conference, addresses this issue.

But what can we do, in a practical way, to help our students grow to Christian maturity, to stop this attrition which is not only the church's loss, but is first and foremost so harmful and sometimes fatal to the youngsters involved? Let us not be afraid of the

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<sup>53</sup> Psalm 103:11,12

<sup>54</sup> Isaiah 55:10,11

<sup>55</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>56</sup> Romans 10:17

obvious, to try again to do the things we are all supposed to be doing anyway. Let us improve our knowledge of the subject matter, our teaching skills, our understanding of students. Let us acknowledge our errors when we make them and apologize for any inconsiderateness we have displayed or trespass of which we have been guilty — lest the gospel be discredited. Let us be quick to forgive for Christ’s sake, as people who have been forgiven much. Let us communicate our sense of privilege and responsibility — not in a grave and pietistic and heavy-handed way, but in the way we come into the classroom, greet the class, carry on our work, express our attitudes toward the calling in which God has placed us. Should our teaching be thought of as a cross we find difficult to carry? Should we give anyone the impression that the ministry is a terrible burden that we can hardly bear up under? Let us communicate our sense of caring for those under our tutelage in the classroom. “ ... Love is patient, love is kind ... it is not rude ... , it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” (1 Cor. 13). Let us communicate our respect for what our students are as God’s people and what they can become as mature Christians.<sup>57</sup>

By building relationships with teens, a pastor is earning his chance to proclaim the gospel to them. He is earning his chance to be the shoulder they cry on when they face tough times. He is earning the chance to be a special part of their spiritual lives.

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<sup>57</sup> Balge, Richard D. “Helping Our Students Grow To Christian Maturity While They Are With Us And After They Leave.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File: <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BalgeStudents.PDF>. February 5, 2012.

## **4. Applications for Current-Day Youth Ministry**

### **4.1 The Needs of Today's Teen**

Today's teens have needs. After what has been written already in this paper, that might not seem like a profound statement. The more profound statement may be that the church can actually fill those needs. For many, this may be a shock, but this is the hurdle we need to jump over if the youth ministry in our congregations is going to thrive and succeed. But before we start sprinting toward these hurdles, we need to step up to the starting line; we need to understand what our teens need.

Today's teens need...you. What a truly profound statement that is! Today's teens don't need a buddy, they don't need an adult posing to be someone he or she is not, they don't need any more empty relationships; they need someone who cares—a friend, an adult, a pastor.<sup>58</sup>

Teens need a mentor who can help them traverse the dangerous and turbulent waters of their teenage years. They need someone who cares for them unconditionally and will listen to their fears, their worries, their successes, and their failures without judging them. Teens need someone who will invest the time and energy into building a relationship. They need a friend whom they can trust.

This is the void in the teens' lives that their youth minister can and ought to fill, but, sadly, this is a void that many ministers fail to fill in the lives of the teens in their congregation. They see a constant lack of participation on the part of their teenage members and they ask themselves, "What's wrong with these kids? Why don't they care about anything that I'm doing? Don't they see all the work and time I'm investing in them?" They ask these questions, but fail to ever get an answer. All the pastors get is a continued wave of disappointment.

Maybe it is time for those youth leaders to begin to ask the question, "What am I doing wrong? What can I do better? How can I better serve the needs of these young men and women entrusted to my care?" Maybe, just maybe, when we start to focus on our teens instead of on ourselves, our ministries will succeed and the teens will come.

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<sup>58</sup> That doesn't mean that you and the relationship you form with your teens is more important than the means of grace. The Holy Spirit creates faith and he works through the means of grace. The Word and the Sacraments are the only means through which faith is created in a person's heart. However, the fact of the matter is, a person can get in the way. As a youth minister, your attitude and the way you conduct your ministry will either help or hinder any work that the Holy Spirit is trying to do through you.

Today's teens need a youth program focused on them, not on results. Too many ministries, whether they are youth ministries or not, fail because they have the wrong focus. People become fixated with numbers—how many people attended, how much money you raised, how much the congregation have grown in the last 5 years. These questions, while they have their place in a congregation's plan, can ruin a ministry.

Youth ministry is often concerned with numerical growth, superficial and instant response, and active attendance, making it more about the ministry than about the individuals. For midadolescents, this is one more form of abandonment. An example is when twelve students arrive and the 'normal' group is eighteen. The first question from the leadership is, 'Where is everybody?' This prompts the twelve to wonder if their presence matters at all.<sup>59</sup>

Teens aren't stupid. They pick up on things that I think many people believe are over their heads. Teens know when they are just a number in the church's books. They can tell when people are just using them, just going through the motions. They need you to be genuine and they can tell whether you are focused on them or just on the numbers.

However, to conduct your ministry in this way takes time. Those who are in charge must be patient; they must be willing to suffer through times of disappointment before the ministry takes off and begins to grow. Why? Because it takes time to build relationships. It takes time to break through the mistrust.

If adults are willing to wade through and wait out this lack of trust and honestly desire to come alongside and nurture adolescents as they make their way into the community of adults, it will not take long for adolescents to recognize their sincerity and allow these adults into their lives. The only qualification an adults needs is the willingness and fortitude to authentically care. Once this foundation is laid, adults can focus on the three specific needs of midadolescents: 1) Youth need refocused, nurturing organizations and programs. 2) Youth need a stable and secure loving presence. 3) Youth need to experience authentic, intimate relationships with adults.<sup>60</sup>

As Chap Clark points out, when this foundation of trust through relationships has been laid, then we can get into actually working with our teens. We can begin to fill their greatest need by leading them into a personal relationship with Christ. We begin to lead them on their walk with God through the rest of their lives.

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<sup>59</sup> Clark, 187.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, 171.

When this foundation has been laid, the congregation can focus on another one of the teen's needs—the need to be a part of the congregation, to be relevant. It has been said that the teenagers in our congregations are the future. In a way, this is true; these are the men and women who will one day be leading our congregations. However, teenagers aren't just the future, they are the present. They are talented, energetic, passionate men and women who are a gift from God for their congregations, right now!

Adults in a congregation need to begin viewing their youth as potential Marys, Timothys, Marks—Godbearing teenagers in the New Testament whom God called to be part of his saving purpose. Rather than viewing the congregation's youth ministry as an effort to keep them off the streets, protect them from the evils of society, or keep them interested in their church, a congregation needs to begin viewing their youths as important partners in bringing others into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup>

When we see our teens in this way, not only will we have a better chance of retaining them in our congregations, but our congregations will be blessed through their gifts. But in order to do this, in order to make our ministries *real* in this way, our teens need more than just an entertainment-based youth ministry. They need something *real*; they need something spiritual—something that they know they can use to guide them in their walk through the trials and temptations of this life and that will lead them into a closer relationship with their God and Savior.

Entertainment-based ministry may lead to larger attendance numbers, but it won't keep the young men and women in the seats. Not only that, but when these fun activities are the brunt of your ministry, it can quickly backfire.

Youth who regularly are faced with exciting events, novel and entertaining, soon come to expect that everything should be fun. Their expectations no longer include the need to accept responsibility, or to work through difficult ministry situations. Because they view their congregation as their parents' church and not something for which they are responsible, they do not become involved in congregational activities. Nor do they seek out Bible studies, service, or learning situations.<sup>62</sup>

Teenagers aren't adults, but they can handle real substance. So give it to them! They can handle it and actually, they want it. Give them what they're asking for. Give them control over their youth group. Show them that you have trust in them. Youth ministers are finding that when they do this, when they let their teens take some ownership, the ministry thrives.

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<sup>61</sup> Strommen, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Strommen, 70.



These are just a few of the needs that the teens in our youth groups have. By no means is it an exhaustive list. Every teen, every youth group, will bring its own challenges and each youth minister will have to discover that list of needs on his own. Every youth ministry will have to be tailored and personalized, but in order to achieve this, pastor-teen relationships will need to be built and cultivated. The foundation will have to be laid.

#### **4.2 The Needs of Today's Youth Minister**

A congregation's youth minister also has needs. There will be a great list of things that he needs to do in order for his youth ministry to succeed. There will also be a number of things that the youth minister needs in order to conduct his ministry efficiently and effectively.

The youth minister in today's congregations needs to be more than just a facilitator of activities. To the teens in his congregation, he needs to be more than just a man in an alb preaching from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. If he is to be the face of the congregation's youth ministry, he has to be accessible to the teens. He has to be trustworthy. He has to be approachable. He has to be a friend to the youth to whom he is ministering.

But in order to be more than just a facilitator, he needs to be willing to put himself out there; he needs to be willing to come out from behind his desk and to walk in the trenches. He needs, to an extent, to open his life to the teenagers. That means spending time with them outside of the walls of the church. Attend high school sporting events, dances, concerts, and plays. Spend time with them and their friends, getting to know them outside of the safety of the pulpit and pew. Enter into their homes and invite them into yours so they can know that you are more than just a man in a white robe standing in front of the congregation every Sunday. Show interest in them—in the music they like to listen to, the movies they like seeing, or even the places they like to frequent. Send them a message or call to congratulate them on their accomplishments. The point is: show them you care!

When a pastor treats his ministry in this way, the teens will recognize it. They will see that he is putting in the effort to build relationships with them. They will recognize that he is concerned with their wants, their fears, and their needs and the youth ministry will blossom. The teens will grow in their relationship with him and, more importantly, their relationship with their Savior.

But this means that the pastor needs to be willing to be hurt—to spend hours planning, organizing, and facilitating and then to taste defeat. He needs to be willing to accept that no matter how much work he puts in, no matter how many hours he slaves over plans for his youth group, there will be times when his ministry will fall, when his well-laid plans will be all-for-naught, when it seems like no one cares. But this is no different than in any other area of ministry. People are sinful. They're going to fail. Ministry is messy; the sooner a pastor learns that, the more rewarding his ministry will become, especially if it is youth ministry.

With this in mind, a youth minister also needs to be able to forgive. Teens are going to fail. They're going to give into their temptations; they're going to make mistakes because that's what teenagers do. A youth minister needs to realize this. The pastor can't let his feelings get hurt. He can't take it personally, but he must be willing to forgive when his teens fall into sin. He must be willing to move past failure and trust that God has a plan.

Even with all these things in mind, a pastor must understand that the relationships he builds with the teens he is serving cannot hinder his ministry. The fact that he needs to be a friend before a pastor doesn't mean that one takes the place of the other. He is still in charge of the spiritual welfare of these young men and women and he cannot do something to hinder his ability to care for their souls. The relationships he builds are to augment his ministry, not encumber it. No matter how many relationships the pastor builds or how strong they become, they must never keep him from fulfilling his duty of shepherding the Lord's sheep. The prime purpose of his ministry is to bring the saving gospel message to the young men and women to whom he has been called to serve, period.

Keeping all these things in mind, the youth minister also has needs of his own that must be addressed. In order to conduct his ministry in this way, a pastor needs time—lots of time! The type of ministry I'm proposing will take time; it will take patience; it will take congregational support.

If a youth minister takes on this challenge of conducting his ministry in this way, it will take more than just an hour or two a week. He will still spend the hours needed behind his desk to plan events and prepare teen Bible classes, but he will also need hours of time spent building relationships, attending events that the teens are involved in, and becoming a part of the teens' lives.

Is this type of time-consumption going to be possible in every congregation? Sadly, no; in places, it will not be feasible for many pastors to devote this amount of time to their youth ministry. For many pastors, a congregation's youth ministry is just one of many different areas of ministry to which he is asked to devote his time. Between the meetings to be attended, the house calls to be made, the Bible classes to be written, the sermons to be prepared, and whatever else the pastors are asked to do, many just don't have the time and can't devote this type of energy to their youth ministry.

So, if a pastor is not called to a congregation which will allow him to devote his time and energy to youth ministry, how can he conduct youth ministry that will satisfactorily serve the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of the teenage men and women entrusted to his care? I would be willing to bet that this is a question that is on the hearts and minds of many youth ministers, those who are called solely to serve the teens in the congregation as well as those whose youth ministry is just another piece of their ministerial puzzle, but the answer is the same for both: The pastor needs help.

Today's youth minister needs parental assistance in the training and spiritual nourishing of the congregations teenage men and women. No matter how much time the pastor devotes to serving the teens in his congregation, he can't be with them twenty-four hours a day. He needs help on the home-front—parents who will take a major role in the spiritual and emotional development of their children, parents who will accept their God-given role to raise their children in a personal relationship with their Lord.<sup>63</sup>

If we fail to do this, we lose a critical piece of this puzzle. The youth group can become nothing more than an escape for parents—a place to drop their kids off for a few hours so they can have some free time. If this is the case, the pastor's attempt to bridge the rift between the adults and teens in his congregation can be irrevocably damaged. This is not the plan that God set forth for parents. They are to play a fundamental role in the lives of their children.

But it can't just be the teens' parents that are helping. The entire congregation has to see this as an important part of their overall ministry and needs to share the load. If we can motivate our members to bring snacks for Bible class, help clean the church a few times a year, or serve

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<sup>63</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-9

on various committees, why can't we motivate them to help in this essential area of the church's mission?

If the pastor really is going to break down this barrier between adult and teen, he can't be the only adult these teens trust. The teens need to see that the pastor is not alone and the pastor needs to be able to delegate—to release some of his youth group responsibilities to others. This doesn't mean that the pastor is neglecting his ministry or growing lazy; it means that he needs some assistance to make the youth ministry everything it can be. The pastor's job is to care for the spiritual needs of his people, but a secondary role he is to fill is to train his members to use the gifts God has given to them.

However, even if a pastor has the time and the volunteers he needs, the ministry can still fail. These things alone are not enough to save a youth minister from the constant temptations of the devil, the doubts of his own mind, or the failures that he will undoubtedly experience.

The pastor's last and ultimate defense in these matters is his own personal relationship with his Savior. This is the pastor's greatest and most important need. He, too, needs to continue to enhance his relationship with his Lord through personal Bible study. When the pastor grows in his faith, he will take comfort in the gospel promises, he will be revived through the words of Scripture to battle the constant enemies of his ministry, and he will understand that Jesus is the only one that has never, and will never let him down. The more he realizes how trustworthy Jesus has been to him, the more patience he will have in building trust in his teens. Without this vital relationship between pastor and Savior, any relationships formed between pastor and teens will be empty and void of the true saving power of the gospel.

There in the words of Scripture, the pastor will find his refuge in times of trouble. There he will find the strength, patience, and perseverance to lead the teens in his care to find peace and rest in that same refuge. When this relationship between pastor and Savior remains strong and active, so will the relationships he builds with the young men and women the Lord has called him to serve.

## 5. Conclusion

Ministry is people. That fact is driven home during a pastor's years at seminary. Everything he is doing, everything he is training for, it's all about the people he will one day be called to serve. They won't be perfect, but they will be the sheep entrusted to him by God. Pastor and congregation will learn to love one another despite their flaws and imperfections. They become his extended family, and he would do anything for them.

If this is the case, why does that loving relationship only seem to extend to those outside of their teenage years? We love the kids in grade school; we love the twenty-somethings; we love the middle-age members; we love the elderly members in our congregations. But what happens to the teens? Why do they fall into this black hole after confirmation and we find ourselves hoping and praying, or just blindly expecting, that they will someday return?

Why do so many youth ministries fail in today's congregations? It probably isn't because of a lack of gatherings, a lack of effort on the part of the congregation's pastor, or even a lack of desire on the pastor's part. Youth ministries today fail because of a lack of relationships.

It doesn't matter how many events the pastor plans, or how painstakingly he works through his teen Bible classes, or how many invites he sends out. Without this essential pastor-teen relationship, the ministry will fail; it will never rise to the expectations or the dreams that the pastor creates in his mind.

How can we expect the teens in our congregations to devote their time and energy to the youth group when they know nothing about their pastor and their pastor knows nothing about them? Youth ministries fail because there is no relationship, no friendship, between pastor and teen.

You may think to yourself, "The teens should want to come to hear about their Savior. They should want to learn!" If you find these thoughts running through your head, you're right; teens should want to come and hear about their Savior and learn. But the fact of the matter is, even if those teens do want to learn, they won't want to come if it's just another adult sitting in front of the class teaching them.

They don't want just another adult preaching to them, they want a friend—someone they can talk to, relate to, and enjoy spending time with. A teen put it like this, "I learn things better from a friend than an adult; most teens do. Stop trying to lead us and be one of us. We know

you're older, but everyone likes to play around once in a while. Make us want to be there by being yourself. Like I said, we didn't need another adult to tell us what we were doing wrong; we needed someone our age to hang out with.”

If we are ever to properly minister to these young people in our congregations, we need to address the thoughts of our teenagers. Pastor-Teen relationships must be developed if we intend to reach the teens, counsel them, and lead them to a lasting relationship with their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

When a youth minister looks at the teens he has been called to serve with all their piercings, their *funny* music, and their strange clothes, he can't see them as aliens or as the enemy. He has to see them as the Lord's sheep who have been entrusted to his care. He has to love them and want to get to know them, want to try to understand them and everything they are going through.

Your teens need you. Be real with them. You might be twenty years removed from your teenage years, but they don't need another teenager in their life. They need you—an adult who will truly love them no matter what, who will care for them, listen to them when they need to vent, and be there for them whenever they need something. This is ministry. This is what you have been called to do. Develop those relationships with your teens and your ministry will blossom, your teens will be edified and brought into a relationship with their Savior and you and your teens will be mutually blessed through the gospel.

When we start to love our teens for who they are—using their talents and passions for the good of the church—the blessings from God will flow and new doors will be opened through which the gospel message of Christ can enter.

When we begin to conduct our ministries in this way, reflecting the love of Christ to the young men and women we have been called to serve with the gospel, there will be relationships formed; there will be love. You will learn to love the teenagers the Lord has placed under your care and they will learn to love you.

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