



***At Lakeview we believe God works through families and parents.***

The following article is offered to bring a biblical perspective to bear on modern ministry practices. All too frequently what is suggested at church is accepted without much scrutiny. We hope this helps reclaim part of our culture for the Lord.

## ***WHAT IS BIBLICAL YOUTH MINISTRY?***

*by Stan Nichols*

My wife and I had been involved in youth ministry for over ten years when we were asked a challenging question: *Is your church's youth ministry biblical?* This sent us on a quest to scripturally validate what we had done for five years as youth workers in a 1,000-member congregation and what we had been doing for another five years in our present church.

After an exhausting search of God's Word, we found no mention of a youth pastor, a youth minister, a youth leader, or a youth sponsor. We read that Jesus as a young person increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man ... but we found no reference to a youth minister taking him to lock-ins, retreats, high-powered youth conferences, or even church youth services. In fact, in our search we found only one scripture on which to base youth ministry: Malachi 4:6, "... turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." Further study confirmed what we already suspected. God expects parents – not youth pastors – to pass the baton of faith to the next generation.

With this new light we examined our present church ministry and realized some truths that took us on a path from shock and denial to acceptance and disgust; and from sorrow and concern to action.

Here is what we, and almost every other youth ministry we're aware of, were doing and calling it youth ministry:

- 1) We turned the hearts of the youth from their parents to the youth pastor; he became their hero.
- 2) Since the values of the youth leaders were not consistent with the parents', we caused a divided allegiance of authority in the minds of the youth. This led to authority-figure problems not only at church, but at school and home as well.
- 3) We placed youth in peer groupings, thus creating peer-dependent kids.
- 4) We perpetuated the youth culture by treating teenagers like "old kids" rather than like the "young adults" they are.
- 5) We damaged the family by assuming parental responsibilities for the spiritual development of their children.

We were wrong! Oh, there were no bad intentions and no lack of love for God, parents or kids, but nevertheless ... we were wrong! God's youth pastors are Mom and Dad, and God's youth group is the family. Furthermore, the church has no Godly authority, permission or responsibility for the physical, social, or spiritual development of any child who has a custodial parent.

So, two years ago we stopped our youth night service and asked the Lord for direction. His answer was twofold. First, we were to enlist and train our high schoolers to work with our elementary-aged children during our mid-week service. This ministry to others takes the high schooler's attention off himself and provides opportunity to mature. A person is a child until he reaches puberty and then becomes a young adult; therefore, adolescence should be a period of practicing being an adult, not continuing to be a child.

The second part of God's answer directed my wife and I to take our years of experience, our resource materials and our concern, and use it to equip moms and dads to effectively parent their children. The goal is for kids to see their parents as heroes! The Bible is clear: God will hold parents – not youth pastors – accountable for the spiritual well-being of their children. The obvious conclusion is that biblical youth ministry is really about enabling and motivating parents to help their children become spiritually mature adults, who will one day pass the baton of faith on to their children.

## **We Entertained Youth**

In our church, we feared the loss of our young people, so we looked for ways to entertain them with church activities. We hired youth directors to provide a variety of programs.



Unfortunately, these youth directors often violated the Scriptural mandate to turn the hearts of the young people to their fathers. Instead, they stole the hearts of the youth by offering them music and activities which their parents would not give them.

As the parents saw the young people turning to their friends and the youth group for fun and games, they decided that they did not understand their teenagers. They began to fear them and soon lost them.

## **God Challenges Youth**

Young people have special qualities that make them tremendously valuable to the Kingdom of God when their energies are properly directed and trained.

The value of Timothy to Paul in the New Testament church is undeniable, yet he was so young that Paul counseled him not to let anyone despise his youth, but instead to be an example to the believers in his life and character.

As a youth, David was despised by his older brothers, but he conquered a giant and turned the tide of the nation.

Today young people have a powerful voice which is being listened to by the world. They must be trained and equipped.

## **We Must Disciple Our Youth**

We will challenge the young people in our church to be mature, Godly examples for the younger children to follow and the older people to respect.

We will not give your young people freedom without accompanying responsibility, but we will train and equip them for effective ministries at the earliest possible age.

We will have youth events, but not a youth group. Youth events would not be exclusive of parents or younger children.

We will teach older brothers and sisters to be best friends with their younger brothers and sisters, and to work on projects with them so they can admire and seek after goals that please the Lord.

## **We Brought the World Into Our Church**

In order to overcome the God-given inhibitions to keep sinners out of the church, we turned the church into something God never intended it to be. We used it as an entertainment center, a recreational facility, or a concert hall so we could reach the lost and have fun too.

Charles Spurgeon declared, “The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of its mission is to provide entertainment to the people, with the view of winning them. Providing amusement is nowhere spoken of in the Scriptures as a function of the church.”

## **God Sends His Church Into the World**

The purpose of having a pure church is to prepare believers to have a powerful witness in the world. In order for believers to be effective in the community, they must demonstrate the brightness of countenance and spirit that comes by living on God’s highest level of spirituality. Any carnality or worldliness will dim the brightness of their eyes and witness.

When sinners see the clearness of our eyes, the brightness of our countenances, and the love and joy of our lives, they are drawn to the light of the Gospel and desire that same life for themselves.

## **We Must Prepare Believers for Ministry in the World**



We will carefully evaluate every activity in our church on the basis of how it will build up each believer in the faith.

We will reject every activity that causes a weaker brother to stumble, or to be offended, or to be made weak.

We will maintain standards of music that are consistent with the character of Christ, and that bring glory to God.

## **We Separated Families**

When a family entered our church, the parents went to their class and then to worship service. Young people in junior high, high school, and college went to their friends during the worship service. Children were assigned to their groups and then to children's church.

During the week, church activities were organized for various age groups. Parents were always busy transporting their children to these activities.

Summer camps also separated sons and daughters from their parents and younger siblings.

## **God Unites Families**

Uniting families is vital for the harmony and effectiveness of the church since relationships in the family are a pattern for relationships in the church. Young men are to appeal to the elders of the church as they would their fathers. They are to appeal to older women as they would their mothers, and they are to work with younger women as they would their sisters, in all purity. *(See 1 Timothy 5:1-2.)*

Families with well-behaved children who genuinely care for each other are tremendous attractions to people who wish their families could be similar.

## **We Must Honor Family**

We will be committed to building strong families that can work together as effective teams, in our church, in the community, and other parts of the world.

We will design activities that will encourage families to be together, and train them to function effectively and to work on projects together.

We will give special attention to helping older children work with younger brothers and sisters, and to be best friends with them.

We will teach parents how to spend quality time with each child so that they can build them up in the ways of the Lord.

## **We Assigned Teachers**

Our church schools were almost entirely designed around the graded class model, which separates children by age groups. We assumed that the teachers would have primary influence on their classes, but instead our children were influenced by peers. Adolescent peer groups lead to peer dependence. (See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1979, Volume VI, p. 414.)

## **God Trains Fathers**

The primary duty of pastors is to train fathers to fulfill their God-given responsibilities in being disciplined men, loving husbands, faithful stewards, and effective leaders.

A man's ability to manage his family is a key determining factor of his ability to lead the church, because an elder must "*manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect*" (1 Timothy 3:4).

## **We Must Work Through Fathers**

We will establish effective training programs for fathers, so that they can discover their purpose in life and help each member of their family to find God's calling.

We will train men to discover and use their spiritual gifts and how to balance their gifts with those of others.

We will maintain a program of accountability so that older fathers can encourage and work with younger fathers.

At the time this article was written in the mid-1990s, Stan Nichols was working with parents and young adults at New Life Community Church in Kansas City, Missouri. This article was reprinted from *Together*, the newsletter of Calvary Ministries, Inc., International.