# Postmodern Models of Youth Ministry

## *Tim Neufeld*

The current state of youth ministry can be described as tumultuous, chaotic, and confused. While many individual and local youth ministries are productive and fruitful, trying to survey the broad landscape of approaches to youth ministry might seem futile and ambiguous. Across North America youth leaders and pastors are asking, "Why is youth ministry not working like it has in the past?" For decades youth ministry has been patterned after, and comfortable with, one or two basic models of operation, but with the onset of the postmodern culture those models are no longer valid. "What do we do now?" cry leaders in the new millennium.

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*There is no longer "one right way" to do youth ministry.*

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### THE PROBLEM

Currently there is a great deal of discussion regarding the impact of postmodernity upon the church. Most Christian scholars and church leaders are keenly aware of the transition from a modern to a postmodern worldview that is taking place. Abram Bergen and Wendell Loewen appropriately addressed this very concern in the spring 2002 issue of *Direction*.[1] However, many leaders are unsure how to structure an engaging ministry for the changing culture. Kennon Callahan very insightfully argues that we no longer live in a "churched culture." In contrast to the churched culture of the 1950s and earlier, the values of the church are not the values of society, people do not seek out church on their own initiative, and people do not view the church as relevant or helpful.[2] We now

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live in an "unchurched culture" and must understand our neighborhoods and parishes as mission fields where new strategies are needed.

Definition of the new culture is not easy. We are in the midst of the revolution, thus we do not have the perspective of time and hindsight to aid us. One hundred years from now books will be written about postmodernity with much more clarity. Common characterizations of the culture are found in words like *secularism, pluralism, relativism, existentialism, individualism,* and *materialism.* Many authors are now forming their own categories for defining the trends. Tony Jones summarizes the postmodern credos: (1) Objectivity is out, subjectivity is in, (2) Question everything, (3) There is no Truth with a capital "T," (4) Tell stories, and (5) Never make lists![3] Leonard Sweet, an expert in addressing the church's response to postmodernity, highlights the acronym EPIC: the new culture is Experiential, Participatory, Interactive, and Communal.[4] It is from the midst of this flux that the youth minister once again cries, "What do we do now?"

## A BRIEF HISTORY

It must be understood that youth culture and youth ministry are relatively new sociological phenomena. Mark Senter meticulously details some one hundred and fifty years of youth ministry beginning with urbanization and the formation of the public school system in the late nineteenth century.[5] The category of "adolescence" was not popularized until G. Stanley Hall published a book by that name in 1905.[6] The primary goal of youth ministry was theological training, or, as it is more commonly known, Christian education. Through the 1960s virtually the only model of church youth ministry involved parents and adults operating as sponsors and/or teachers for their youth.[7] These ministries focused primarily on teaching and discipleship led by adults.

While parachurch campus ministries such as Youth for Christ (YFC), Young Life (YL), and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) were founded in the mid-twentieth century, their programs became powerful models for the churches of North America in the 1970s. Many congregations saw the success of these agencies, particularly in the areas of evangelism and fellowship, and began to pattern ministries after them. Thus, churches began to hire young charismatic leaders who were gifted in leading adolescents. Many YFC, YL, and FCA workers took full-time positions in churches, and youth ministry became a serious profession. Youth pastors used a variety of resources and activities in an attempt to attract young people to the church. In the 1990s the model of youth-pastor-as-activities-director began to stagnate and show

serious weaknesses. By the end of that decade many in the youth min-
istry community were well aware that the "old ways" of doing ministry
were no longer working. It was time for a new direction.

The amount and type of literature published in the field of youth
ministry proves the point well. The standard texts of the 1980s were
few but well known: *Youth Ministry* (Lawrence O. Richards), *High
School Ministry* (Mike Yaconelli and Jim Burns), and *Organizing Your
Youth Ministry* (Paul Borthwick). These books defined a very unified,
professional approach to youth ministry. While they addressed develop-
mental issues of the different ages, they dealt only minimally, if at all,
with contextual issues of ministry.

In contrast, the last five years have seen an explosion of publica-
tions regarding the new shape of church youth work. Gone are the days
of one-size-fits-all ministry. The new books ask questions and present
multiple options for ministry with titles like, *The Coming Revolution in
Youth Ministry*, *New Directions for Youth Ministry*, *Purpose Driven
Youth Ministry*, *Student Ministry for the Twenty-First Century*, *Post-
modern Youth Ministry*, and *Four Views of Youth Ministry*. Youth Spe-
cialties Books has even met the challenge by creating a new "academic"
division, dedicated to a professional discussion of the ongoing changes
in culture and ministry.[8] One thing is clear from reading these new
texts: youth ministry will never again have a common methodological
approach as it did in the previous century.

## FOUR APPROACHES

Mark Senter, perhaps the most articulate spokesperson for the pro-
fession of youth ministry, has recently edited and coauthored an
extremely insightful book, *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the
Church*. In this work he and three other youth ministry scholars exam-
ine four philosophies of ministry to postmodern adolescents. Senter is
not as concerned with defining specific models as he is with discussing
the different approaches: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Mis-
sional, and Strategic.

Prior to his discussion of the approaches, he presents two questions:
(1) What is the relationship between fellowship and missiology? and (2)
Should youth ministry focus on engaging adolescents in present min-
istries of the church, or prepare them for future congregational involve-
ment? These two questions become foundational issues for any forma-
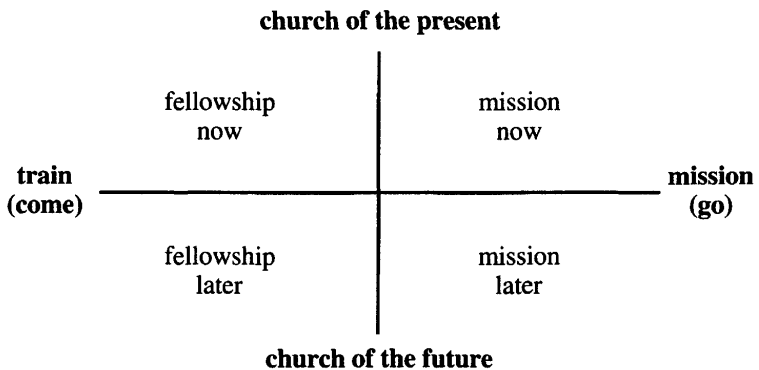tion of a specific model.

In a discussion of the tension between fellowship and missiology he
states,

> The relationships of community to evangelism, of intergen-
> erational to age-group-specific ministries, and of heteroge-
> neous to homogeneous groupings of young people all create
> challenges in our understanding of youth ministry and the
> church.[9]

Here he uses missiologist George W. Peter's discussion of centripetal and centrifugal approaches to mission. "*Centripetal* efforts draw momentum towards a central point (in other words, the church), while *centrifugal* strategies spin energy toward the periphery (or the nonchurch)." We can clearly see the historical distinction between church and parachurch. The church has a "come" mentality focusing on the community (centripetal) and the parachurch has a "go" mentality focusing on the unchurched (centrifugal).

Regarding the second issue, when students will participate in the ministry and life of the church, Senter says there are two answers: either now or in the future. Some churches decide to activate their adolescents and engage them in the present life and ministry of the congregation. Others understand their mission as one of preparing students for healthy roles in the church of the future. "Simply put, the question boils down to whether young people are the church of the future or of the present."[10]

With that in mind, Senter presents the following figure.[11]

**church of the present**

|  |  |
|---|---|
| fellowship now | mission now |

**train (come)** ———————————————— **mission (go)**

|  |  |
|---|---|
| fellowship later | mission later |

**church of the future**

Out of this grid emerges the four approaches. Senter suggests that all youth ministries will experience tension between *fellowship now* and *fellowship later*, *mission now* and *mission later*, and will philosophically lean to one of the four quarters.

## SPECIFIC MODELS

Amid the flux of contemporary youth culture and postmodern ministry there are far too many styles of ministry to review in one essay. The task at hand is to identify and correlate (though somewhat loosely) current major models of youth ministry within the four categories mentioned above.

### Fellowship Now

The "Inclusive Congregational" approach is a label given to ministries focusing on integrating adolescents into the current life, mission, and practices of the local church. Espousing this position in *Four Views*, Malan Nel believes that the biggest problem youth ministry faces today is its isolation from the larger church.

> To my mind there is no argument that holds water for the preservation of the traditional dichotomy between youth ministry as a duty of the local church and youth ministry as an organized form of working with youths separate from catechesis, of Christian education. Young people are not just partly the congregation's responsibility, they are wholly so.[12]

Nel and others believe that youth ministry should not be viewed as a ministry set apart or segregated from the adults or children of the church. Proponents argue that adolescents should not be separated from the congregation, but that youth ministry should be the responsibility of the entire community of believers. "The Inclusive Congregational approach asserts that youth ministry is not a separate or additional mode of God's coming to the youths."[13] Youth ministry, then, becomes a comprehensive ministry of the entire congregation.

Many youth workers have been exploring and developing models of the *fellowship now* philosophy. In 1994, Mark DeVries authored *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, a pioneering work. DeVries correctly identified the isolationist mentality to which many youth ministries have succumbed. Churches often become the most age-segregated places an adolescent will visit. He bemoans the fact that,

> over the last century, churches and parachurch youth ministries alike have increasingly (and often unwittingly) held to a single strategy that has become the most common characteristic of this model: the isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents.[14]

Two Mennonite authors have made wonderful contributions to the community/family-based approach. Lavon Welty (*Blueprint for Congregational Youth Ministry*) and Carol Duerksen (*Building Together: Developing Your Blueprint for Congregational Youth Ministry*) have been articulating a congregational model of ministry.[15] Duerksen argues that "in a community of faith, people are not seen as objects to be acted upon, but rather as individuals who are actively involved."[16] DeVries, Welty, and Duerksen believe that students, families, and congregations can experience life and faith together through worship, Christian education, missions and service projects, social gatherings, retreats, recreation, and other community activities.

Another form related to the Family-Based model is the Mentoring model. This approach tries to partner adults with students in one-on-one relationships with the goal of bringing students to spiritual maturity. Youth should not be left alone to navigate the complexities of life. The mentoring approach is especially helpful when adolescents do not have strong nuclear families. Wayne Rice is just one of many supporters of this model. Rice states,

> It's no longer acceptable to think of [youth ministry] as something that can be done by one person—a "hired gun"—or even a small group of people. The church is the family of God, and in any family it's the responsibility of the older generations to pass along their values, traditions, stories, and faith to children.[17]

### Fellowship Later

The second approach discussed in *Four Views* is designated the "Preparatory" approach. Education, training, and discipleship are the primary goals of this approach. While typical youth activities are still used, the purpose of these activities is clear: the continued spiritual development of adolescents. Wesley Black presents and outlines this philosophy:

> The Preparatory approach to youth ministry can be defined as a specialized ministry to adolescents that prepares them to participate in the life of existing churches as leaders, disciples, or evangelists. Students are viewed as disciples-in-training. . . . Developmental dynamics suggest that youth ministry be viewed as a laboratory in which disciples can grow in a culture guided by spiritual coaches.[18]

The emphasis on education and preparation for future ministry is the most notable distinctive of this approach. While integration into the life of the church is an important goal, youth programs still retain their youth-oriented activities so that students will have a chance to learn and grow in a comfortable environment. Teaching and proclamation of the Word become top priorities. Pastors and volunteers must assume the role of teachers, or of mentors (in a less formal way than in the Mentoring model mentioned previously). The Preparatory approach is adult driven. "The most effective youth ministers today seek to partner with parents and teachers in all ministries of the church to guide youths to know God."[19] Any model arising from this approach would see adults as spiritually mature trainers and caregivers.

Several models can be associated with this *fellowship later* philosophy. The Christian School model is primarily concerned with the spiritual formation of adolescents, though it is not designed to be a church or local congregation. The purpose of this model is to

> [build] young people into well-rounded Christian adults using the Christian high school as a social, academic, and spiritual laboratory, shaped by Christian teachers and administrators who share and foster a Christian worldview, so that as adults the graduates will live as Christians in a non-Christian world.[20]

The Christian school uses adults, including youth pastors, to teach, train, and disciple adolescents through classes, homework, social activities, chapels, retreats, special events, and youth groups.

The Discipleship model also relies heavily on training and equipping students, but in this case through Bible study and prayer.[21] This model uses adults as small group leaders. The "core group" is the locus of activity. While there are exceptions, the Urban or Safe Place model often aligns closely with the *fellowship later* philosophy. Many urban programs use adults and church facilities to create an alternate environment where adolescents can retreat and be discipled. In this "safe place," students can discover who they are in Christ and begin a journey toward spiritual maturity.[22]

## Mission Now

The "Missional" approach is the third philosophy presented in *Four Views*. The approach addresses the irrelevance of a Christian subculture and an entertainment-based youth ministry comprised of events and

programs. Supporters of this paradigm ask the church to recognize, understand, and use the culture rather than be fearful of it. Those who are "churched" are desperately disconnected from those who are "unchurched." Chap Clark addresses this approach and says, "the fact is that for large numbers of adolescents, youth ministries in churches represent a world that is foreign, irrelevant, and even occasionally offensive."[23] He continues,

> The Missional approach views Christian adults as missionaries and adolescents as a people to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Principles that guide cross-cultural ministries around the world apply to youth ministry.[24]

This philosophy features prominently the mandate of the great commission to "go." The goal is to create a bridge between the secular culture and the church by intentionally accepting the lost and unconnected and helping them feel sociologically comfortable. The youth ministry must then become a place that is safe and culturally relevant for unchurched postmodern adolescents. The responsibility for evangelism and discipleship is shared by adults and students, because students are understood to be active participants and contributors in the church.

The High School Subpopulation model is clearly focused on reaching out and "going" to the unchurched of various adolescent subcultures. Here youth ministry happens when Christian adults, and to a lesser degree Christian students, connect with unreached clusters of teens.

> In the high school subpopulation model, Christian adults with similar interests or backgrounds to youth within specific subpopulations of adolescent society discover a means by which to build relationships with that group of people and share both a love for the common interest and a love for Jesus Christ.[25]

Ministry happens when leaders reach out to groups of teen moms, skaters, basketball players, musicians, and so on. This model must be intentional and must work to identify needs within the adolescent community. Related closely to this method is the Campus Ministry model. Here students become passionate missionaries on their campuses, sharing their faith and bringing unchurched back into the youth group.[26]

Mention of the Meta model should also be made. In this model, "adult and student leaders equip and empower caring Christian cell

groups to multiply in amoeba-like fashion."[27] This method of youth ministry relies on strategic cycles of cell group formation, growth, and the birth of a new cell group. These groups tend to be natural, comfortable, and safe environments for the unchurched adolescent. The Urban or Safe Place models mentioned under the previous approach might also find a place in this philosophy for similar reasons.

### Mission Later

The final approach addressed in *Four Views* is named the "Strategic" approach. A curious and recent church planting strategy can be witnessed throughout North America, usually in large cities. Well-established existing churches are birthing new congregations based on successful youth ministry programs. Churches with ministries to skate kids have planted skate churches. Congregations with services designed for Gen Xers have birthed Gen X churches. Some of the new churches meet on the same campus as their parent church but at alternate times. Others relocate to entirely different facilities. Senter delineates the Strategic approach:

> The church must view youth ministry not so much as a means of turning out models of Christian living in order to perpetuate existing church ministries, but as the best opportunity to launch a vital Christian witness for the next generation. The Strategic approach creates a community of leaders and youthful Christians that enables a youth ministry to establish a new church to maintain a theological continuity while expressing faith in a community relevant to both Christ and culture.[28]

The role of the youth pastor in this approach is to strategically prepare a group of willing people to birth a church (the future mission). The youth pastor would be the most likely leader of this new church. While the group would be intergenerational, it would consist primarily of adolescents and young adults at its inception. This approach grew out of frustration with the institutional church's inability to assimilate young postmoderns and to retain senior high and college graduates.

The Youth Church model is the best example of this philosophy. Cathi Basler and her husband, Ed, began a youth church because they had a passion for the lost and could not find a traditional church community that would accept the type of students they were ministering to. She believes that most Christian youth groups minister primarily to

Christian teens. "We found ourselves less concerned whether young people were smoking cigarettes outside and more concerned with how they were doing on the inside."[29] Out of this frustration came home meetings with unchurched teens, and then a full-fledged youth church congregation. Senter states, "In the youth church model, the youth minister and spiritually gifted and qualified adults prepare young people to be spiritual leaders by taking responsibility to establish a new church."[30]

In a lesser form, some churches do not specifically opt to plant a church, but will have a youth service meet at the same time as the adult service. In either form, youth churches typically have their own worship services (including their own preacher, offering, special music, etc.), missionaries, service projects, budgets, and leadership teams. The Youth Church model is gaining in popularity and will probably greatly impact the way churches are planted in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Again the youth pastor petitions, "What do we do now?" The options are virtually endless. That is certainly part of the postmodern dilemma. Just twenty years ago there were only one or two significant models of youth ministry. Now there are too many to adequately keep track of. Senter's four approaches to youth ministry do help in loosely categorizing some of the more common contemporary models.

While there are many differences between the models, a number of similarities arise within the four approaches. All are in agreement that the church faces a tremendous challenge in the postmodern world and must make some adjustments as it learns to live in an unchurched culture. Each position seems to champion the theme, "Change the method, not the message." There also appears to be a trend (at least in writing if not in practice) toward integration of age groups in the hope of forming multigenerational congregations. All of the models decentralize the role of the youth pastor and spread responsibility of the ministry out to adult volunteers and/or student leaders. Finally, the success of each approach indicates there is no longer "one right way" to do youth ministry. Context is critical and must be taken into consideration when deciding upon a specific model for ministry. �

## NOTES

1. Abram Bergen, "Youth Encountering God," *Direction* 31 (spring 2002): 18-25, and Wendell Loewen, "Thirsty for the Reign: A Kingdom Theology for Youth Ministry, Part One," *Direction* 31 (spring 2002): 35-45.

2. Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 19-20.

3. Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 26-27.

4. Leonard I. Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 215-22.

5. Mark H. Senter III, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1992), 83-152.

6. Ibid., 93.

7. This model lasted well into the 1980s for many ethnic and/or rural congregations such as the Mennonite Brethren, and is still the model for some.

8. See the web site www.YouthSpecialties.com/academic for more information.

9. Mark H. Senter III, ed., *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Missional, Strategic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), xiii.

10. Ibid., xiv.

11. Ibid., xv.

12. Malan Nel, "The Inclusive Congregational Approach to Youth Ministry," in *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, 4.

13. Ibid., 6.

14. Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry: Reaching the Been-There, Done-That Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 21.

15. See *Direction* 31:1 (spring 2002) for an interview with Duerksen (68-73) and a review of her recent book (109-10), *Building Together: Developing Your Blueprint for Congregational Youth Ministry* (Scottdale, PA: Faith & Life, 2001). Duerksen's book is a revision and update of Lavon Welty's *Blueprint for Congregational Youth Ministry* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life, 1988).

16. Carol Duerksen, *Building Together*, 42.

17. Wayne Rice, "Intentional Connections: Using Mentoring in Youth Ministry," in *New Directions for Youth Ministry*, ed. Amy Simpson

(Loveland, CO: Group, 1998), 68.

18. Wesley Black, "The Preparatory Approach to Youth Ministry," in *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, 40.

19. Ibid., 56.

20. Mark H. Senter III, "Basic Models of Youth Ministry," in *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, ed. Richard R. Dunn and Mark H. Senter III (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1997), 166.

21. Ibid., 175.

22. For further information see the following: Senter, "Basic Models," 184-89; Harvey F. Carey, "An Oasis of Hope: A Working Model for Urban Ministry," in *New Directions for Youth Ministry*, 31-46; and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *Youth Ministry in City Churches* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1989).

23. Chap Clark, "The Missional Approach to Youth Ministry," in *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, 79.

24. Ibid., 80.

25. Mark H. Senter III, "Emerging Models of Youth Ministry," in *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, 200.

26. For further information see Monty L. Hipp with Mikal Keefer, "On-Campus Missionaries: Campus-Based Youth Ministry," in *New Directions for Youth Ministry*, 117-127.

27. Senter, "Emerging Models," 205.

28. Mark H. Senter III, "The Strategic Approach to Youth Ministry," in *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, 117.

29. Cathi Basler, "Finding a Lost Generation: Ministering Through a Youth Church," in *New Directions for Youth Ministry*, 107.

30. Senter, "Emerging Models," 209.