

5 VIEWS ON THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Perspectives on What Could or Should Be

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INTRODUCTION

MARK OESTREICHER

Way back in the early aughts (that's the early 2000s, to be clear), I was given something of a platform for prognosticating to the youth ministry tribe. I was the president of an influential youth ministry training organization called Youth Specialties, and as part of that role, I got to give the closing general session talk at the National Youth Workers Convention for a bunch of years in a row, in three cities each fall. This meant I was giving a "sending out charge" to something like 10,000 to 15,000 youth workers each year (for the record: my "platform" is comparatively tiny these days, and I love it).

I chose to be a provocateur.

Maybe I was called to that role. Maybe? No question, though, some part of this was my choice, born more out of ego than Holy Spirit-leading. That acknowledged, I said (and wrote) some things that weren't completely inaccurate about our need for significant change in our thinking and practice of youth ministry. But when I look back on that body of work (that's a generous term—maybe I should just call it my "central themes"?), 99% of it was focused on what we needed to *stop doing*. Without going into all the details, the condensed version of my message was, "Don't you see? We're doing it wrong!"

I'd already been friends with Kurt Johnston for years at that point. Kurt was, at that time, the junior high pastor at a massive church in Southern California, not too far from where I live, and we shared a passion for ministry to young teens. Kurt and I have a friendship that doesn't always make sense in a world where most of us only develop meaningful relationships with people we agree with, because Kurt and I disagree on many things, including many theological points. But the friendship is real, and we both enjoy the tension.

As I was getting louder and more focused in my "We're doing it wrong!" message, Kurt kept gently pushing back with suggestions that

God was still at work, that great things were still happening in pretty much every youth ministry, and that (to use his constant words) “the sky is not falling.”

All these years later, Kurt and I have likely both moved closer to the middle point between our previously polarized perspectives. I mean, he wasn't totally wrong back then, but neither was I (his character was better, though). There's been great movement in the collective thinking of youth workers over the last two decades, beginning to address many of the things I (and others) thought were broken or outdated. But God is still working, and Jesus is still pursuing every teenager—before, during, and after they're involved in our ministries. And so many wonderful things are happening in thousands of youth ministries you've never heard of, and never will.

Why Youth Workers Like Thinking About the Future

Whatever your age, I think youth workers *tend to* be some of the most future-oriented people in church leadership. It's not that senior pastors or children's workers or worship leaders don't think about the future (shoot, just look at all the books about change and the future written for senior clergy), but rather that youth workers who *aren't* future-oriented often get weeded out over time.

We're generally hopeful people. Not that you're a hope-monster at every moment, of course. But because youth ministry is just SO FREAKING HARD, people don't last long if they don't have a sense, a commitment, that God continues to author a story even if we can't see it. When my seventh grade guys small group has a particularly unproductive meeting (which, if I'm honest, is roughly 50% of them, maybe more), I can only find the grit to return the next week because I hope for what I do not yet have, and wait for it patiently (that's roughly Romans 8:25, if it sounds familiar).

Youth ministry has less accurate feedback loops than pretty much any other ministry in the church. Little kids are either stoked to be there and paying attention or they're not. Adults vote with their feet and provide positive and negative feedback. But my most unruly seventh grade guy—the one who regularly wears me down to a nub—pulled me aside to pray for me a couple weeks ago when he knew I was dealing

with a hard issue. What do I do with that (other than allow it to fuel my hope)?

We're generally change-oriented. I recently had a little “a-ha” about this reality. Animals, as I'm sure you know, tend to move into fight, flight, or freeze when a potential threat comes into their field of senses. But the healthy option, which you might *not* have heard of—the fourth option—is to orient. For an animal, this means they do *not* fight, freeze, or run away. Instead, they adjust. You *cannot* work with teenagers for long if you don't learn how to orient. In conversations, in teaching, in small group leadership, even in programming. We youth workers are trained, by our audience, to orient. This means that we naturally and progressively learn to be change-oriented, which often results in reflecting about the future.

We work with people leaning toward the future. Children (mostly) live in the present. Adults are all over the place, but the older they get, the less they tend to live for the future (and many live for the past). But those amazing teenagers: They're obsessed with the future. They might be pumped about it or terrified about it, but “next” is a constant thought.

The Future of Youth Ministry: Then and Now

In 2010 (just after the aughts!), after I'd moved on from Youth Specialties, I was asked to lead a seminar at the National Youth Workers Convention on The Future of Youth Ministry. To prepare for this, I sent an email to a dozen national youth ministry thinkers and asked them to give me a few sentences about how they saw the future. One of those responders was Dr. Kenda Dean of Princeton Theological Seminary, whom I consider to be our MIBIYMT (that's our Most Important Brain in Youth Ministry Today). The two paragraphs she sent me—about the need for us to “re-weirdify Christianity”—took my breath away, and all these years later, were the nexus for this book.

But I thought it might be interesting to go back to some of those comments from 2010 and invite a few people to update their words. I'd like to share four of those here. I'm wondering if you'll see the same tonal shift I see. In some ways, this parallels the personal shift I've gone through, which I alluded to in the opening paragraphs, a shift from

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“not that” to “this,” from “what we’re doing wrong” to “what positive steps we need to take.”

Dr. Kara Powell of Fuller Theological Seminary (and the Fuller Youth Institute) wrote, in 2010:

I think the future of youth ministry is one in which the age-segregation that has dominated the church ends and we move toward the type of intergenerational community and integration God intends. We’re seeing in our research how important intergenerational community and relationships are to Sticky Faith.

Kara’s new statement:

The future of youth ministry hinges on the church focusing on what matters most. It’s about adults staying intimately connected to Jesus, and helping this wonderfully diverse generation grasp that Jesus best satisfies their hunger for identity, belonging, and purpose.

Kurt Johnston of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, wrote words in 2010 that I’ve already referenced:

Youth ministry is too nuanced...too fluid...to predict its future with any level of certainty. I do not believe the youth ministry sky is falling and look forward to a bright future, in whatever shape it takes.

Now he writes:

The lessons learned from 2020 combined with the reality that youth ministry is an ever-evolving living organism makes me more hesitant than ever before to try to predict what its future will look like. One prediction I feel somewhat comfortable making is that I think youth ministries will begin to draw stronger theological lines in the sand, identify their distinctives more clearly, and be bolder in the ways they communicate their message to teenagers.

Greg Stier of Dare 2 Share Ministries was super concise in 2010:

In the future, the church will be forced to marginalize or centralize youth ministry...no in-between.

Today he sure sounds more hopeful to me:

The future of youth ministry is not more and better programs, it’s clearer and more focused mission. A decade from now teenagers

won't be satisfied with just "going to youth group" but will wholeheartedly embrace going on mission for Christ with their youth group. Youth leaders that continue down the road of typical youth group done in the typical way will see diminishing results. Those who champion a Gospel advancing, disciple-multiplying, teen-activating approach will see their youth groups not just survive, but thrive. The future of youth ministry depends on whether or not youth leaders embrace this radical new paradigm in youth ministry (that's actually 2,000 years old).

And finally, **Dr. Steven Argue**, who is now with Kara at Fuller Theological Seminary, but was doing a variety of consulting and teaching in Michigan back in 2010, wrote some decidedly strong and punchy words:

Hey church, adolescents are NOT leaving you. You are perpetually leaving them. Stop using statistical bullshit to project blame. Repent. Unless you're willing to let adolescents mess with your own life, you have no business messing with their lives. Most churches are not worthy of youth pastors. Youth pastors, stop giving yourself to organizations that use you to better "market" their church to families; that expect you to "produce" programs; and that exploit you because they know it's hard to leave the kids you love. Walk away. Don't take the job, because if you do, you're wrecking it for all of us. Raise the bar. Boycott churches unworthy of youth pastors. Amen.

These days, Steve is feeling more poetic, apparently, as he sent me these gorgeous words that read like a sonnet:

I still worry about what I wrote ten years ago because I lament seeing amazing youth leaders who truly care about young people get boxed in by churches and organizations that lack imagination.

*Maybe another way to say it is that, perhaps,
the best youth ministry doesn't happen in the spotlight of "wow,"
the best youth leaders have few social media followers,
the best youth ministries may not even look like "youth ministry."
I have grown to find these to be more interesting, more holy.*

Youth ministries must not be tempted to use teenagers to justify their existence,

*instead, they must keep seeking to understand teenagers,
always adjusting to see and hear them more clearly,
supporting young people where they say they need youth ministry the
most.*

*Here are the decentered, messy, sacred spaces
where young people travel
where Jesus is
and where youth ministry must faithfully go.*

A Bit of Orientation

As much as I'd like to leave it there, with Steve's beautiful (and hopeful) final verse, you would benefit, I believe, from a bit of framing for what you're about to read.

Choosing the five contributors for this book was a hefty challenge. I knew we needed Kenda to expand her thoughts about "re-weirdifying" Christianity. And I'd heard Mark DeVries speak a few times about his views about the future, and knew we wanted him on this project. Then I created a big ol' list of possibilities—some with themes, some without—and started asking people. And the mix of five we ended up with is, I have to acknowledge, pretty amazing.

In our previous three multi-views books (*4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers*, *4 Views on Talking to Teenagers About Sex*, and *5 Views on Youth Ministry Short-Term Missions*), we chose contributors who covered a spectrum of thought, but were also in the trenches actively doing youth ministry and living out the ideas they wrote about. Then we had each of them write a response to one of the other chapters, pairing them with contributors who had very different perspectives from their own.

But for this book, our contributors are less day-to-day youth workers and more thought leaders. So, instead of having them respond to each other's chapters, I chose to go a different route: We asked each chapter writer to connect us with a (younger) in-the-trenches youth worker who was already living into the future their chapter proposed. This adds some rich story to this collection, as well as a clear sense that *this is possible*.

I hope you find this book challenging, and I trust it will stir your imagination. More than provoking you, I pray it will encourage you. And heck, let's lean into the bulk of the book with Steve Argue's final words after all:

*Here are the decentered, messy, sacred spaces
where young people travel
where Jesus is
and where youth ministry must faithfully go.*

—Marko