

Youth Ministry in the Town or Country Church

by Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director

An area of concern for many pastors in town and country settings is youth ministry. With only five teenagers in the church—three in high school and two in junior high, no youth pastor, and no gym, how can one possibly have a youth ministry? Perhaps part of the answer is to look at youth ministry from a whole different perspective. Doing so might lead us to conclude the small-town church has an advantage!



Introduction: A swimming or running church?

David Ray, in *The Big Small Church Book*, tells a story¹ about a duck hunter who got a new retriever that, when commanded to fetch a stick thrown out on a pond, *ran* across the water. Wanting to show off his remarkable dog, the hunter took his partner, George, out for a demonstration. He threw the stick, gave the command, and his dog *ran* across the water and retrieved the stick. The hunter glanced proudly at George, who returned a noncommittal look. The stick was thrown again and retrieved, but still George didn't seem impressed. Suppressing disappointment and irritation, the hunter asked, "What do you think of my new dog?" With a rather disinterested tone George answered, "Your dog can't swim very well, can he?"

Many today believe there is a "problem" with the town or country church: it doesn't "swim" very well. Some think that in order to be a good church it has to be a good swimmer. City churches swim—they're good. Small-town churches don't swim—they're not as good.

Could it be that the small-town church is a different dog, but not an inferior dog? Small-town churches may not swim well, but what if they can run? And what if by running they get the job done just as well as churches that swim, though a different way?

Another question: Should we try to teach that dog how to swim? A lot of time and effort is devoted these days—particularly at

schools and conferences and in books—to trying to teach non-swimming churches how to swim. But maybe swimming isn't the best way for some churches to get the job done. Maybe some can do it differently but with equally good results.

This could be applied to a number of facets of church life, from worship to preaching to evangelism. But perhaps there is no better illustration than youth ministry.

Application: youth ministry

When asked what is needed for a good youth ministry, answers would likely include: programs, money, big events, lots of kids, a band, and elective classes on a variety of subjects. With this definition, how many town and country churches can have a "good" youth ministry?

Might there be a different way? What if the small-town church can get the job done by running instead of swimming?

A personal ministry. Joani Schultz² wrote about a small-town pastor who, when asked about his youth ministry, paused, chuckled, and then said, "You must be mistaken. We don't even have a youth group!" But as his story unfolded, it became apparent that he *did* have a youth ministry. He knew every youth by name. He attended their ball games. He was intentional about talking to every teen each Sunday at church. Most every week he spent one-on-one time with each teen. He helped a single father plan a birthday party for his teenage daughter. In the article Schultz quoted one

teen who said this about his pastor: “Some of the best talks I had with my pastor were times we’d meet downtown while I was running errands for my mom. Pastor Johnson always acted interested in me and took time to talk. He cared about me outside the church walls.”

Did that pastor and church have a youth ministry? The pastor concluded they didn’t because they didn’t do it like big churches. Their method was running instead of swimming. But might it be possible to accomplish the same end another way? Can one lead teens to Christ or help teens grow in their faith through a personal ministry instead of a program- or event-oriented ministry?

One country church pastor’s youth ministry consisted of inviting teens to his home every Thursday night. He and his wife did personal discipleship (she with the girls, he with the guys) followed by food and games, often while sitting around their kitchen table. Is this an inferior way to do youth ministry? Perhaps this question can be answered by another: How many big-church teens have a personal relationship with their pastor?

An intergenerational ministry. There’s a general rule of thumb: as churches get bigger, the likelihood increases that there will be more age-segregated ministries, with youth ministry being Exhibit A. When teens enter the building of a large church, they head to the youth wing and their “subchurch.” When was the last time a youth in a large church had more than a few seconds conversation with someone 20 years older?

Yet listen to this youth pastor who once served a big-church youth group but left that for a smaller-church situation:

Teenagers who experience only the youth group and never bond with others in the church are almost guaranteed to drop out [of church] after high school. If it’s only the youth group that drew them, then only the youth group can hold them. No more youth group, no more kids.

That’s why I worked so hard to get our megachurch kids interacting with the rest of the church. But it was nigh unto impossible. Large churches tend to have an age-division paradigm that controls everything.³

As we observe all the neat stuff that big-church youth ministries do, they may appear to have an advantage. But maybe their advantage is only temporary. Over the long haul the small church, with less programming and less glitz, may actually have the advantage.

Are there advantages to age categorization? Undoubtedly so. Should a church never categorize by age? Not at all. The fact is that, in many small churches, it just isn’t possible to separate by age. Perhaps this should not be viewed as inferior. Both ways have their advantages. One person has observed that “the grass is greener on both sides.”

The mixing of ages offers many pluses. The small-town church is one of the few places left in American society where intergenerational relationships still exist. This small-church characteristic actually has considerable biblical support. The word picture that the church is most often compared to in the Bible is that of a family (e.g., see Gal. 6:10, 1 Tim. 3:15, 5:1-2). Think about biological families: God’s design for our upbringing is to be in a family where there are older and younger brothers and sisters that relate to each other. There’s a mom and dad who are a generation older than the kids. There are grandparents who are another generation older. There are uncles, aunts, and cousins. In a family you might be the only one your own age. (Unless, of course, you are a part of that infamous family in that song where you are your own grandpa!) Families are designed for intergenerational relating.

So also God desires that church families have intergenerational relating. Yet as churches get bigger, unless there is real intentionality about doing otherwise, there tends to be less of this aspect of God’s design present.

Can you see benefits to intergenerational relating? The younger are being mentored by those who've been there. The old provide stability, wisdom, history, and stories. The young provide joy, hope, a future, idealism, enthusiasm, and energy. My daughter is a hugger. In particular, she hugs senior ladies at church. Some time ago after she broke her arm she got a card from one of the senior ladies saying, "I'm going to miss your hugs." My son has a special relationship with a 70-something grandfather-type in our church. Does intergenerational relating sound inferior?

Mark DeVries says, "If you take a quick summary of the youth ministry books from the last decade, what you'll find is an almost across-the-board agreement that the primary challenge facing young people in this generation is their extensive isolation from the world of adults."⁴ Yet in most town and country churches it is *abnormal* for this kind of age separation to occur. Could it be that this is an advantage?

So, what's your answer if someone visits your church and wants to know about the ministries you offer for youth? Instead of stuttering or apologizing, perhaps you could share how your church values being an intergenerational family.

One pastor expressed his fundamental philosophy with these words: "Our church has a youth *ministry*, not a youth *group*." He continued, "When our youth invite others, they don't say, 'Come to our youth group.' They say, 'How about coming to church with me?'"

A participative ministry. One Texas pastor was lamenting that his church had virtually no youth program. But 15 of the 18 youth in his church were active in some ministry of the church on a *weekly* basis: ushering, singing in the "adult" choir, helping in the nursery, making banners, playing an instrument, reading scripture, or assisting in children's Sunday School classes. This church, without even planning to do so, had created multiple opportunities for its young people to serve. Does it have a youth ministry? DeVries says, "If this church is ever able to create a 'successful youth program,' it may destroy its youth ministry."⁵

Town and country churches often involve their youth in most every facet of church life. Doing so integrates youth into the church, which in turn makes them much more likely to stay long past the last high school ski retreat.

One small-church observer said, "I see grandmas and kids working together. There may only be five or six young people, but they each have a job. It's like any other family: 'Here's your chore.' What incredible training for living out what the church is all about!"⁶

In fact, the small-town pastor should constantly remind his congregation that "our church is a church that trains young people." Let them know that a higher percentage of vocational Christian workers come from smaller churches. The small church is a great place to encourage involvement of all ages, which in turn instills in them a ministry bent that lasts a lifetime.

Ben Patterson says, "It is a sad fact of life that often the stronger the youth program in the church, and the more deeply the young people of the church identify with it, the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they grow too old for the youth program. Why? Because the youth program has become a substitute for participation in the church. . . . When the kids outgrow the youth program, they also outgrow what they have known of the church."⁷

Same purposes, different means

Having the kind of youth ministry described above doesn't mean that town and country churches should try to accomplish different purposes than bigger churches. The swimming and running dogs accomplished the same thing—they both retrieved the stick. So also small churches and big churches should work toward fulfilling common purposes, but they might do it in different ways—one running, the other swimming.

Saying this is not meant to be a value judgment. It's not saying the small-town church shouldn't emulate the big city church because the big city church is doing it wrong. It's not saying the small-town

church's methods are better, any more than one would say a swimming dog's method is better than a running dog's. It's simply saying that small-town churches are unique. Being unique, how they best accomplish God's purposes might differ from how big city churches accomplish the same purposes.

The small-town church advantage

Small-town church pastors are often heard to speak wistfully of what they could do if some sort of dream-maker transported them away from the constraints of their small situation into the romanticized possibilities of big numbers, big budgets, and big facilities. They want their church to swim, not run.

The secret to good youth ministry in the town or country context is to focus on what you have, not on what you don't have. All of the youth in your church fit in one car. They all fit around your dining table. They all know each other intimately. They can all participate in the worship services. They all have a relationship with their pastor. They all regularly and frequently interact with adults.

Certainly large churches have their advantages. But with many aspects of the church, especially youth ministry, it's surprising how underrated the small church environment is. The real measure of an effective youth ministry is not how many

programs or events a church has or how many kids. It's lives that are impacted and changed. It's youth who continue on in their Christian walk beyond their teen years. It's youth who become Christian leaders and workers.

One should not attempt to measure the effectiveness of a youth ministry while kids are still in their teens. It should be measured after kids leave the youth group—three, five, ten years later. When measured this way, the environment town and country churches provide for youth is a real contender.

One pastor well pointed out, "The Bible doesn't even have a word for *teenager*. So when visiting parents come up to me or call the office and ask, 'What programs do you have for teenagers?' I smile and say, 'We have church!'"

¹ David Ray, *The Big Small Church Book* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), p. 5.

² Joani Schultz, "How Small Churches Minister to Youth," *Leadership* (Spring, 1985), p. 80.

³ Dave McClellan, "The Small-Church Advantage," *Group* (Jan/Feb, 1999), p. 34.

⁴ Mark DeVries, "Elephants, Testosterone, and Family-Based Youth Ministry," *Youthworker* (May/June, 2001), p. 22.

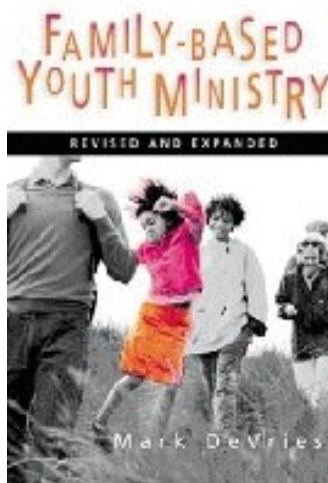
⁵ Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 68.

⁶ Dean Merrill, "Not Married-with-Children," *Christianity Today* (July 14, 1997), p. 35.

⁷ Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, p. 117

We Recommend... *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, by Mark DeVries

(Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, rev. 2004).



This book shares the ministry philosophy of a youth pastor and how he fleshes it out in a larger-church context. Readers will quickly realize that, while implementing his family-based, intergenerational approach to ministry must be a challenge in his large-church setting, doing so would be quite natural in a town or country church setting. We'll let this book "sell" itself by sharing some sample quotes with you:

- "Sadly enough, for many teenagers, the place they are the most segregated from the world of adults is their church. And churches with the more "successful" youth programs seem to particularly exacerbate this problem." (p. 41)
- "...teenagers are an integral part of the *body* of Christ... When an organ is removed from a living body, that organ dies, and sometimes the body dies along with it. The same principle is true in the body of Christ. Whatever new models for youth ministry we develop must take seriously the fact that teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood as they are connected to the total body of Christ, not isolated from it." (p. 43)
- "There is no such thing as successful youth ministry that isolates teenagers from the community of faith." (p. 64)