The Youth Ministry Arenas Survey:
Leader perceptions of effectiveness in three arenas of youth ministry

New Research from the Youth Ministry Institute at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

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Abstract

The Youth Ministry Institute at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary conducted a study on youth ministry practices called The Youth Ministry Arenas Survey. Researchers invited leaders to tell what they were doing in three arenas of youth ministry: teenagers in the youth group, teenagers in families, and teenagers in the congregation. This paper includes the survey design overview, insights from the quantitative survey data, qualitative thematic analysis of follow-up interviews, and initial online assessment results.

Introduction

The arenas of youth ministry are the domains in which youth leaders operate. Think of the arenas in terms of time spent doing something. For most of the history of youth ministry the sole arena has been working with teenagers. Working solely with teenagers is the arena most commonly referred to when we think about youth ministry. After all, it is ministry to *youth*. In many cases, the reason someone chooses to work in youth ministry is *because* they love young people and want to see them come to Christ and grow as believers. However, investing solely in youth programs is not enough. The traditional youth ministry model is over fifty years old and designed for a culture that no longer exists. A new approach to youth ministry is needed that focuses not only on students in a youth group, but also families and the church congregation.

Expanding the arenas of youth ministry to more than just time with students is imperative. Most notably, the arena of focus in recent years has been parent/family ministry. The single most important influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.[1] Youth ministers should not only plan their week around time with students but also time with parents. The result is a deeper and broader perspective on what it means to be in youth ministry.

In addition to the parent/family arena, some are calling for a third arena—the congregation. This arena involves time spent developing ways to help teenagers fully engage in the overall life of the church. Youth want relationships with adults.[2] "Adults underestimate how much kids want to be with us. Kids are far more interested in talking to caring, trustworthy adults than we think they are."[3] Youth ministry no longer means constructing "a parallel church experience for youth that operates separately and independently of the work, worship, education, and service going on in the rest of the congregation."[4] The three arenas – teenagers in the youth group, teenagers in

families, and teenagers in the congregation – provide a comprehensive foundation for effective youth ministry in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Basis

According to Barna, today's young people are part of the first truly "post-Christian" generation.[5] Post-Christian refers to a decline in spiritual indicators such as church attendance, belief in God, prayer, and Bible reading. Even so, today's students are open to the gospel. Seventy-eight percent of today's teenagers, known as Generation Z, believe in God and 41% attend weekly religious services.[6] Yet Gen Zers are twice as likely as adults to be atheist.[7] Seven out of ten high school students have significant doubts about God and faith.[8] Yet fewer than half talk with either church leaders or peers about their struggles.[9] Recent LifeWay research shows that 66% of students active in their church during high school dropout during their college years.[10]

The church must focus on developing lasting faith in teenagers that carries them beyond the comfortable confines of the youth group into adult faith for the real world. Students develop resilient belief by what Kara Powell and Steve Argue call "faithing." It is the growth of students in "owning and embodying their own journey with God as they encounter new experiences and information."[11] Richard Ross has championed what he refers to as "ministry in thirds,"[12] a youth ministry with a balanced emphasis on teenagers, parents, and the congregation.[13] Ross' threefold ministry approach provides the structure for both our study and the development of the online assessment tool.

A healthy ministry invites young people into a relationship with Jesus Christ and helps them grow toward spiritual maturity, often in a youth ministry environment. The disciple-making process begins by leading young people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.[14] The next

step is providing teenagers with the spiritual food from God's Word necessary for growth. A key component in establishing disciples is Bible study. Biblical illiteracy is common in the church today.[15] In addition, young people lack a deep understanding of their faith.[16]

Today's churches often fail to produce teenage disciples with a maturing faith. Research indicates that only 10% of teenagers who stay active in church after high school are "resilient disciples."[17] To produce resilient disciples leaders must develop a strategy that presents a clear path for spiritual growth.

A dichotomy exists in some churches today between evangelism and discipleship. It is common for a church to emphasize one over the other. Preston Cave reminds ministry leaders that "The 'win' isn't salvation. The 'win' is transformation."[18] Healthy churches provide both an opportunity for teenagers to respond to the gospel and grow spiritually as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Ministry to parents is an important part of balanced youth ministry. Parents are the single most significant influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents.[19] The degree to which a parent models faith has a direct impact on faith in adulthood.[20] "Although there is a place for parents to formalize teaching and training, the natural flow of their lives offers the most fertile soil for knowing God personally."[21]

Youth leaders can help parents model lasting faith.[22] "When parents model what it is to love and walk with Jesus, they develop an authenticity that gives them authority and credibility when they teach and train their children."[23] Reggie Joiner notes that parents spend nearly 3000 yearly hours with a student compared to ministry leaders who spend approximately ninety yearly hours with

that same student. Equipping parents for effective discipleship is an essential part of youth ministry leadership.

It is not enough to focus on teenagers and parents.[24] A third arena is necessary—the congregation. The *Sticky Faith* research of Kara Powell and Brad Griffin revealed that a predictive factor of lasting faith is "connection to the larger congregation through participation in intergenerational relationships and worship."[25] Similarly, Mark Cannister reports how "students feel valued, empowered, and honored when other adults ask them to contribute to meaningful ventures."[26] According to Cannister, "transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults."[27] When teenagers see adults in their church as supportive and responsive to their needs, they are more likely to view God in the same way.[28] Mark Devries agrees, noting the essential nature of connectedness among teenagers and the church:

> If our goal is to create mature Christian adolescents, then maybe we should focus only on moms and dads. But our goal is not adolescent disciples. It is adult disciples. And adult disciples are shaped, as they move into adulthood, not simply by their parents' faith. When I asked groups of adults, "How many of you had at least one person in your life, outside your mom and dad, who had as much or more influence on your faith than your parents did?," always more than half the room raises their hands. An exclusive focus on the faith maturity of "teenagers" during their teenage years can be short sighted.[29]

Within this context, the Youth Ministry Institute (YMI) of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, launched the Youth Ministry Arenas project to research leader perceptions of effectiveness in three arenas of youth ministry. The primary research question: What are youth minister perceptions of their effectiveness in three arenas of youth ministry: teenagers in the youth group, teenagers in families, and teenagers in the congregation?

The project director developed a pool of 85 questions for the Youth Ministry Arenas (YMA) survey based on previous research. An expert panel of youth ministry professors evaluated and critiqued each question. The expert panel included: Dr. Brent Baskin, Chair of the Department of Christian Studies and Associate Professor of Christian Studies - Youth Ministry, Shorter University; Dr. Karen Jones, Director of Veritas Theology Institute and Professor of Christan Thought and Practice, Huntington University; Dr. Paul Kelly, Chair of Educational Leadership and Professor of Educational Leadership, Gateway Seminary; and Dr. Richard Ross, Professor of Student Ministry and J.M. Price Chair of Religious Education, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The work of the expert panel resulted in a reduced list of thirty questions.

Method

Stage one of a three-stage process consisted of a quantitative and qualitative survey of youth ministers. Stage two involved follow-up phone interviews with participants who scored in the high range on the survey. Stage three consisted of refinement of the YMA survey instrument for use as an online resource for youth leaders.

State One Participants and Measures

The research team solicited survey participants from three sources: 865 YMI email contacts, Southeast Conclave attendees (January 2020), and social media snowball. A total of 314 responses contained usable data. In addition to the YMA survey itself, the questionnaire asked about church size, youth group size, socioeconomic level, and ethnic diversity. At the end of stage one, the researchers met via video conference with an advisory panel of leaders to discuss the initial findings and illicit feedback to inform further research in stage two. The advisory panel included: Jay Barbier, Youth Specialist, Tennessee Baptist Mission Board; Bryant Laird,

Associate Director of Student Ministry, South Carolina Baptist Convention, Brandon Lewis, Youth Ministry Strategist, Louisiana Baptist Convention; Cameron Wilkins, State Missionary, Georgia Baptist Convention; Brent Baskin; Paul Kelly, and Richard Ross.

State Two Participants and Measures

The research team scored each response. Scores on the YMA were ranked high (total score of 80-100), medium (total score of 60-79), or low (total score of 59 and below). Of the 76 participants who scored in the high range on the YMA, 65 provided emails indicating a willingness to participate in further research. The researchers sent an email to each leader inviting the respondent to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. The researchers achieved just over a twenty percent response rate and conducted 14 telephone interviews with youth leaders. Qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews revealed significant themes. This paper presents the initial findings related to the survey data, comments from the advisory panel, and analysis of the follow-up phone interviews.

Demographics

Youth leaders from over 25 denominations participated in the survey. However, 78% (n=244) of respondents were Baptist or Southern Baptist. Each additional denomination comprised less than 1% of the overall survey population. Practically speaking, this is a Southern Baptist survey. Eighty-one percent (n=255) of the participants were under the age of 44. Fifty percent (n=157) of the population was under the age of 34. A majority (65%, n=204) of youth workers held full-time positions. Twenty-one percent (n=67) held part-time positions and 14% (n=43) were volunteers. Sixty-three percent (n=198) of survey respondents have served in their current position less than five years. Of those, 13% (n=40) have served less than one year in their current position. Thirty-

four percent (n=117) of survey respondents served in churches over 100 years old. A majority of respondents served in churches that have existed for at least 50 years. Forty-seven percent (n=148) of survey respondents served in suburban communities (37% in rural communities and 15% in urban communities). Ninety-two percent (n=290) serve predominately white churches (Asian n=5, Black/African-American n=8, Hispanic/Latino n=7, Other n=4).

Limitations

Our demographics indicate two significant limitations for our study: small sample size and lack of diversity. The lack of diversity in our research is indicative of the lack of diversity of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC is made up of primarily white congregations. Minority ethnic fellowships comprise just over 22% of the 51,538 Southern Baptist congregations.[30] Yet only 8% of our participants serve minority congregations. One way to increase diversity is to highlight the tremendous work of minorities. The researchers are committed to making the online assessment tool available to a broader, more diverse population.

Findings

The Youth Ministry Arenas (YMA) survey contained Likert-type items. Taken together, the questions on the survey produced a total score. Individual items on the survey were grouped together to produce three subscales (Teenagers in the Youth Group - YG, Teenagers in Families - TF, Teenagers in the Congregation - TC). Cronbach Alpha for each sub-scale indicated a high level of internal consistency (YG 0.851, TF 0.871, TC 0.738). The items of the scale were sufficiently intercorrelated, and the grouped items were found to measure the underlying variable.

Figure 1: YMA Composite of overall percentages of leader scores in each category (High 80-100, Medium 60-79, Low 59 or less).

■ High (24%)　■ Medium (54%)　■ Low (22%)
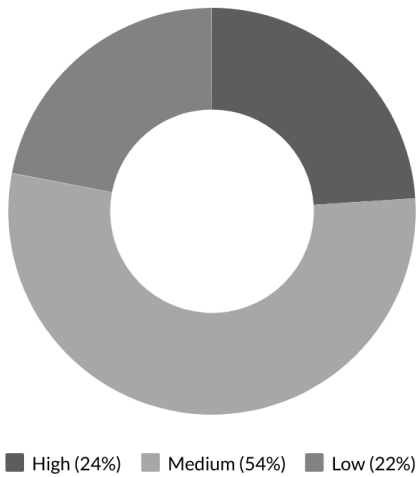
Scores on the YMA were ranked high (80-100), medium (60-79), or low (59 and below). These scores translated to exemplary (high), average (medium), and struggling (low) youth ministries. There was a statistically significant mean difference between the high and medium group scores. Figure 1 indicates most (54%, n=170) youth leaders perceive they are doing an average job. Only 24% (n=75) of youth leaders scored high on the YMA and 22% (n=69) scored in the lowest category. The average score was 69.

Figure 2: YMA Subscale scores (High 80-100, Medium 60-79, Low 59 or less).
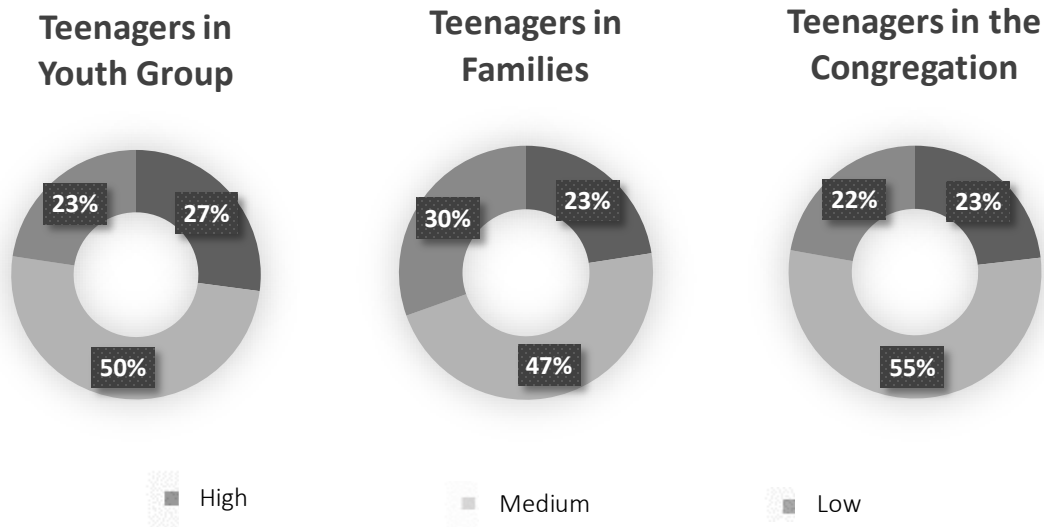
Scores on the individual subscales mirrored the overall YMA scores. Figure 2 indicates fifty percent (n=157) of youth leaders scored in the medium range for their work with Teenagers in the Youth Group (YG). Likewise, most (TF: 47%, n=148; TC: 55%, n=173) scored in the medium range for their work with Teenager in Families (TF) and Teenagers in the Congregation (TC). The big take-away from our research is the revealing truth that about half of leaders feel they are doing only an average job in youth ministry. Less than one-fourth believe they excel at youth ministry and about a fourth recognize they are struggling in youth ministry.

Age was an advantage in our survey. Older youth ministers scored higher in all three arenas. Youth leaders between the ages of 35-54 scored higher than younger leaders between the ages of 21-34. Leaders 55-64 years of age scored significantly higher with Teenagers in Families, while younger leaders struggled with parent engagement.

Length of tenure was not a factor in our research. The same number of leaders (38) scored high on the YMA in two tenure categories (1-5 years and 6-21 years or more). Youth ministers who have served less than a year scored the lowest.

Church size was not a factor in our study. The same number of churches (38) scored high on the YMA in two combined size categories (Small to Large and Extra Large to Mega). Although a vast majority of respondents were SBC, denomination was not a factor in whether or not a person scored high or low. Likewise, size of the youth group was not a factor in the YMA score.

Analysis of the survey results revealed three youth ministry practices that leaders indicated they were *not* doing:

- Although a majority (77%, n=242) state they value families with teenagers, most (81%, n=254) do not provide opportunities for parents of teenagers to meet together for prayer and support. Most (61%, n=192) do not offer family-focused fellowships or activities for teenagers and parents.
- A majority (81%, n=254) do not provide opportunities for older adults to disciple or mentor parents of teenagers.
- A majority (61%, n=192) do not help families and teenagers talk together about faith.

Several important aspects of youth ministry were highlighted through an analysis of the YMA survey and follow-up interviews:

1. Leaders' perception of ministry to teenagers in the youth group.

YMA scores in the Teenagers in the Youth Group sub-scale produced a youth group leadership score. Our research indicates excelling in four areas contributes to higher scores on the YMA: gathering in small groups for bible study and discipleship, teaching spiritual disciplines, developing teens as leaders, and training youth to share their faith.

Exemplary youth leaders perceive themselves to be doing well at gathering students in small groups and helping them develop spiritual disciplines. They reported higher agreement with the

statements: teenagers gather in small groups and teens learn to develop spiritual disciplines (4.22 and 4.26). However, most youth leaders perceive they are not doing well at training teens for leadership roles and to share their faith. Leaders who scored in the medium and low range on the YMA reported disagreement with statements related to training teens for leadership roles in the youth group (3.02 and 2.34) and training teens to share the gospel (3.50 and 2.83). Exemplary youth leaders made all four areas a priority. This data suggest that most youth leaders are excelling or doing reasonably well in these four areas of their ministry with teenagers in the youth group.

A majority of participants (62%, n=195) provide an opportunity for teens to learn spiritual disciplines such as prayer and bible reading. Our study found significant differences in participants' perceptions about teaching spiritual disciplines. Exemplary youth leaders had the highest mean rank (4.26) on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly disagree) on helping youth develop spiritual disciplines. On the other hand, leaders who scored in the medium range on the YMA had a lower mean rank (3.68). Exemplary youth leaders taught teenagers to practice spiritual disciplines.

Half (51%, n=160) of all participants provided leadership opportunities for teens within the youth group. In our research, there were significant differences in participants' perceptions about providing opportunities for teens to serve in the youth group. Exemplary youth leaders had the highest mean rank (4.40) on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on teens serving the youth group. By contrast, average youth leaders had a lower mean rank (3.14). A majority of exemplary leaders (83%, n=62) provide opportunities for teens to serve within the youth group. However, only 41% (n=31) provide training for leadership positions in the youth group.

YMA data clarifies ministry leader's perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses in ministry to teenagers in the youth group. Over half of the respondents (55%, n=173) intentionally train teens to share the gospel. Three-quarters of respondents (75%, n=236) provide opportunities for teens to participate in intergenerational worship.

Our research found significant differences in participants' perceptions on discipling teenagers one-on-one or one-on-two. Exemplary youth leaders had the highest average (4.01) on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) on discipling teenagers one-on-one or one-on-two. This indicates that exemplary youth leaders provide discipleship opportunities beyond large and small group gatherings. By contrast, leaders who scored in the medium and low range on the YMA had much lower average scores (2.92 and 2.22, respectively). These scores indicate that most leaders in our survey do not provide mentoring-type discipleship.

Exemplary youth leaders demonstrated skills in both outreach and equipping. The correlational matrix in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) indicated three items under teenagers in the youth group were closely related: priority, welcoming, and attraction. The three survey items were: Teens are a priority at my church, my church is welcoming to non-Christian teenagers, and my church attracts teenagers. Youth ministers who scored high in youth group leadership on the YMA have successfully led their churches to prioritize teenagers and provide a welcoming environment resulting in an attractive church. Three additional items under teenagers in the youth group were also closely related: Training for Leadership, Serving in Leadership Roles, Developing Spiritual Disciplines. Youth leaders with high youth group leadership on the YMA are training teens for leadership, providing opportunities for them to serve, and helping youth develop spiritual disciplines. While our study revealed a link between discipleship and

leadership development, we believe the correlation requires further study. Discipleship and leadership development are both important aspects of youth ministry but are not inextricably related.

In our follow-up conversations with exemplary youth leaders, small groups are the primary discipleship method. Leaders also indicate that personal relationships are the context for discipleship. Healthy relationships between volunteers and teens in small group ministry were emphasized. These relationships were characterized as "modeling" and "intentional." Leaders expressed the importance of volunteer leaders as a "vital aspect" of ministry to teenagers and expressed they "could not do ministry without our volunteers." Training of volunteers varied from monthly, quarterly, and annual sessions. The researchers asked leaders their perception of the most significant barriers to the discipleship of teenagers. Leaders report the busy lifestyle of teens as the greatest barrier to youth involvement in discipleship. In addition, leaders indicate parents not discipling their students as the a significant barrier.

2. Leaders' perception of ministry to teenagers in families.
YMA scores in the Teenagers in Families sub-scale produced a family ministry leadership score. Our research indicates excelling in four areas contributes to higher scores on the YMA: parent support groups, family-focused activities, older adults mentoring younger adults, and helping parents and teenagers talk about faith.

Exemplary youth leaders reported higher agreement with the statements: my church provides family-focused activities for teens and parents, and my church helps families talk together about faith (4.1 and 4.26). Average and struggling youth leaders reported disagreement with statements

related to parents of teens meeting together for support (2.28 and 1.5), family-focused activities (2.92 and 1.91), and older adults mentoring younger parents (2.22 and 1.64).

This data suggests that most youth leaders are not genuinely engaged in family ministry. In the last two decades, youth ministry has emphasized parents, and yet our survey indicates we have done little to move the needle toward a significant impact on families. Some leaders argue that parent/family ministry is outside of the purview of youth ministry. In short, some would say, "It's not my job." We are not saying that youth leaders must teach adult bible studies, organize adult ministries, or plan adult fellowships; however, a reciprocal relationship exists. We believe that youth ministers are uniquely positioned to exert significant influence on the ministry to and discipleship of parents and families.

Exemplary youth leaders demonstrated an emphasis on valuing families in general and discipleship of parents specifically. The correlational matrix indicated two items under Teenagers in Families were closely related: My church values families with teenagers; and single parents of teenagers are welcomed and cared for at my church. Youth leaders with high family ministry leadership have led their churches to place great value on families with teenagers. One way this value is demonstrated is through the love and care for single parents. Two additional items under Teenagers in Families were closely related: Parents of teenagers meet together to pray for and support one another; and Older adults disciple/mentor parents of teenagers. Youth leaders with high family ministry leadership have led their churches to provide opportunities for parents of teenagers to be in discipling relationships in which they are prayed for and supported. In addition, leaders provide opportunities for intergenerational discipleship.

In the follow-up conversations, exemplary youth leaders report time with parents as the primary parent ministry method. Leaders were intentional about interactions with parents. They referred to casual conversations after church, at school sporting events, at teen performances, etc. This deliberate approach to engaging parents in conversation is evidence of a relational context for parent ministry. The *Growing Young* research completed at Fuller Youth Institute embodies a like-minded commitment to teenagers and their families. "We can't engage with children and adolescents apart from the systems in which they are embedded – in particular, their families."[31] Leaders also expressed the positive and negative impact of parents on youth ministry. While they report the benefit of parent support in youth activities, leaders also talked about the ways in which parents can be a hindrance to ministry.

3. Leaders' perception of ministry to teenagers in the congregation.

YMA scores in the Teenagers in the Congregation sub-scale produced a congregational leadership score. Our research indicates excelling in four areas contributes to higher scores on the YMA: teens participating in weekly intergenerational worship, mission work alongside church members, opportunities to serve in the church, and church ministries dependent on teenagers.

In our study, most leaders provide opportunities for intergenerational worship. Exemplary youth leaders reported higher agreement with the statements: teens in my church have ministry opportunities to serve my local congregation and there are ministries at my church that depend on the leadership of teenagers (4.57 and 4.05). Leaders who scored in the medium and low range on the YMA reported disagreement with statements related to teens participate in missions work alongside members of the congregation (3.35 and 2.17), teens have ministry opportunities to

serve my local congregation (3.70 and 2.85), and there are ministries at my church that depend on the leadership of teenagers (2.87 and 1.85). Our research suggests that most youth leaders are not providing opportunities for teenagers to connect to the congregation. Students may have opportunities to fall in love with their youth group, but not their church.

Leaders who scored high in congregational leadership demonstrated a commitment to valuing teenagers and leading youth to serve the church and community. The correlational matrix indicated two items under Teenagers in the Congregation were closely related: My church values the contributions of teenagers and Teenagers are considered full members of the congregation. Youth ministers with high congregational leadership have led their churches to value teenagers and see them as vital members of the congregation. Two additional items under Teenagers in the Congregation were closely related: Teenagers have the opportunity to serve my local congregation; and Teenagers participate in missions work in the local community alongside members of the congregation. Leaders with high congregational leadership have led their churches to provide a place for teenagers to serve. A key element of this ministry is service in tandem with adult members of the congregation. Mark Cannister agrees noting, "the broader church must be prepared for and committed to receiving teenagers into its midst by valuing them for who they are and allowing them to contribute to the whole life of the church."[32]

In our research, churches primarily utilize teenagers in children's ministry. The top area of involvement outside of working with children is media ministry. Teens also serve their youth group in various leadership roles. Few teens serve on official church committees. Our study found agreement with the *Growing Young* research related to youth leadership. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin identify "keychain leadership" as a core commitment for churches that intentionally

connect teenagers with their congregation. "Beyond simply the launching of a student leadership team, keychain leadership is a spirit and commitment demonstrated by both paid and volunteer leaders that permeates every area of our church."[33]

In the follow-up interviews, exemplary youth leaders report a high expectation of teen service in the church as the primary connection method. Teenagers in these churches are expected to serve in various "ministry teams." Leaders spend time training and coaching students for service. In our exemplary churches, if students are not involved in serving in some way, they are less likely to develop a connection to the congregation. As in the previous two arenas, relationships are the context for teen connection to the congregation. Leaders actively seek to build relationships between young people and other age groups. The emphasis is on "bringing generations together" and helping teens "get to know adults." Exemplary leaders indicated "silo" ministries that operate with little connection to other ministries or members of the congregation were a barrier to effective connection of teenagers to the greater church family. Church policies barring youth membership on official church committees were another barrier to teen involvement in leadership beyond the youth group.

Online Assessment Tool Development

The researchers end goal was to develop a free online assessment tool to help youth ministers measure effectiveness in the three arenas. The researchers focused on creating an assessment based on the initial YMA survey. Based on the follow-up interviews in stage 2, additional questions were added related to volunteers in the three arenas: Volunteers are encouraged to contact students outside of church (phone calls, text messages, attend ballgames, etc.); Adult

volunteers at my church engage with parents of teenagers in their small group; Adult volunteers at my church help teens feel connected to the congregation.

Questions related to how a church values youth ministry, family ministry, and teenage contributions to the congregation were separated from the main assessment. The value questions were: Teenagers are a priority at my church, My church values families with teenagers, and My church values the contributions of teenagers. The value questions were placed into a separate category allowing for comparison to the assessment scores.

The online assessment tool retains the original survey structure utilizing Likert-type responses. Like the original survey, respondents receive an overall YMA score and three sub-scores for Teenagers in the Youth Group, Teenagers in Families, and Teenagers in the Congregation. The process of scoring the assessment is automatic and users receive their scores immediately. In addition to viewing scores, users can download a free personalized 17-page PDF report based on their scores. The report contains a detailed breakdown of scoring in each arena and scores on the individual items in the assessment. The report also includes suggestions for improvement in each of the three arenas and comparisons of scores to other youth leaders in a matching demographic from the research study. The Youth Ministry Arenas Assessment is now available at ymarenas.com

Implications

Intentional Youth Ministry

Youth leaders who scored high on the YMA demonstrated intentional focus on all three arenas. Connecting to teenagers in the youth group is natural for ministry leaders. Yet equipping parents and connecting students to the congregation require diligence and planning. As our salvation

does not happen without the intentionality of Jesus toward us, discipleship does not happen without intentionality toward others. Terry Linehart identifies biblical discipleship as "up-close and shared," having a life-sharing, communal nature that fosters behavioral learning. "If adult leaders are close enough for young people to see them live out a Christ-centered faith, then there is a greater opportunity for learning, for spiritual growth and faithfulness, for direction and redirection, and for support during difficulties."[34] While ministry leaders cannot force a relationship to flourish we can provide opportunities and experiences where they are likely to do so.

Relational Youth Ministry

A leader's priority should be building godly relationships rather than programs.[35] The importance of relationships appeared again and again in our research. Jesus focused on relationships. When he called his disciples in Matthew 4:19 it was a relational invitation—follow me. In fact, true discipleship can only take place in the context of relationships. Youth leaders must intentionally invest in relationships with teenagers. God-centered relationships produce faithful and mature disciples.[36] In fact, the strongest predictor of a student staying in church after high school is three or more adults investing in the young person's life between ages 15-18.[37] Students need intergenerational relationships, yet they often do not have relationships with older and wiser believers.[38] Leaders must intentionally seek out godly adults of all ages willing to disciple youth.

Greater balance in Youth Ministry

A majority of youth leaders focus their energy entirely on teenagers. Greater attention to families and the congregation is needed. Stage three of our research focused on the development of a tool to help ministry leaders identify their strengths and weaknesses related to the arenas of youth ministry. Youth ministry in thirds, as championed by Ross, provides one avenue for balanced

planning. Additionally, we believe seminary and ministry training should reflect a balanced approach to education, ensuring future ministry leaders are well-prepared to minister to students, parents, and alongside the local congregation.

Conclusion

The YMA research provides a theoretical framework for intentional, relational, and balanced ministry to youth. Effective youth ministry calls for attention to three arenas: teenagers in the youth group, teenagers in families, and teenagers in the congregation. A majority of leaders are settling for acceptable mediocrity in their ministries. The stated values of ministry leaders are not mirrored in their ministry design or implementation. We can, and must, do better.

Qualitative data from ministry leaders scoring high on the YMA provides insight for increasing youth ministry effectiveness across the three arenas. Personal, healthy relationships with teenagers are the foundation for discipleship. Small groups provide the ideal atmosphere for discipleship and/or mentoring relationships. Training volunteers is a key to success. Valuing and championing the family increases effectiveness of ministry to parents. Connecting ministry values with practical, intentional ministry to parents is essential. Valuing teenagers as integral to the life and ministry of the larger church is imperative. Students must move beyond connecting to their youth group to developing a lasting relationships with the body of Christ.

In a post-COVID-19 world, building relationships in decentralized structures that are loosely connected by technology will be a challenge. Ministry leaders must champion an emphasis on ministry to youth despite the difficulty. Ministry may look very different from our personal experiences, but our mandate remains the same – to help students grow in Christ, surrounded by a godly family, and connected to a loving congregation.

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