
A Challenge from Richard Ross to Senior Pastors Concerning Eighteen-Year-Old Disciples and the Future of the American Church

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Major changes in the church are necessary to make many more eighteen-year-old disciples. In most churches, only the senior pastor has the leadership strength to guide the church to make those changes.

Senior pastors face relentless demands and time pressures. Consequently, they only can give time to those matters most crucial to the accomplishment of the church's mission. Transforming the young into lifetime, kingdom-impacting disciples is just such a strategic activity.

Senior pastors can delegate to others the implementation of a disciple-making strategy, but the future of the church may hinge on the senior pastor's taking the initial lead role.

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The Current Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Senior pastor, I know you yearn to accelerate the harvest of the lost and to expand our impact upon culture. I know you would love to see young disciples from your church have a direct role in accomplishing the Great Commission in our day.

But how successful can we be at that if the church cannot even keep its own children?

SCRIPTURE

I am concerned because the American church seems to be on the verge of repeating a tragic moment in the history of Israel.

“And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. . . . And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.” (*Judges 2:7, 10–11; unless indicated, all Bible quotations from the ESV*)

Are we on the verge of losing a young generation in the church? Keep reading.

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace: “A variety of studies report that 50 to 70 percent of young Christians walk away from the church by the time they are in their college years. Even those who don’t leave find themselves struggling to believe Christianity is true. Approximately 40 to 50 percent of students in youth groups struggle in their faith after graduation.” (*So the Next Generation Will Know*, 34)

Chap Bettis: “Dr. Kara Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Seminary took a more conservative approach and only counted those who were a part of a church or youth group when they graduated from high school. Her estimate, based on multiple surveys, was that up to 50 percent of young people did not stick with their faith once they were in college.” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 9)

Chap Bettis: “Britt Beamer of the American Research Group studied only those who said they attended church every week when they were growing up but never or seldom attend today. After more than 20,000 phone calls, he came to a shocking revelation: Of those who reported they no longer believed the Bible was true, 40 percent first had doubts in middle school, 44 percent first had their doubts in high school, and about 11 percent had their first doubts in college. In other words, we are losing many of the hearts of our children in junior high, even though we don’t lose their bodies until later.” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 9–10)

Ben Trueblood: “In a study done earlier this year with LifeWay Research, we found that 66 percent of students who were active in their church during high school no longer remained active in the church between ages 18–22.” (*Within Reach*, 12)

David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock: “There is a countercultural 10 percent of young Christians whose faith is vibrant and robust.” (*Faith for Exiles*, 32)

David Kinnaman: “The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it’s a disciple-making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.” (*You Lost Me*, 21)

David Platt: “From the start, God’s simple design has been for every single disciple of Jesus to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples until the gospel spreads to all people in the planet.” (Quoted in *Growing Up*, xvi)

Robby Gallaty: “So what is disciple-making? We could say that it is intentionally equipping believers with the Word of God through accountable relationships empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to replicate faithful followers of Christ.” (*Growing Up*, 19)

The Senior Pastor

Transforming teenagers into rock-solid disciples by age eighteen may be the most strategic way to move the church from lethargy to living out her mission in the power of the Spirit for the glory of King Jesus.

Major changes in the church are necessary to make many more eighteen-year-old disciples. In most churches, only the senior pastor has the leadership strength to guide the church to make those changes.

I grew up in a pastor’s home. Senior pastor, I know you face relentless demands and time pressures. Consequently, you only can give time to those matters most crucial to the accomplishment of the church’s mission. Shaping the young into lifetime disciples is just such a strategic activity.

You can delegate to others the implementation of a disciple-making strategy, but the future of the church may hinge on your being the catalyst for change.

You can use your pulpit ministry to prepare the hearts of the congregation to disciple the young. You can frequently share stories about what God is doing in the lives of individual teenagers and the overall youth ministry.

The vast majority of youth pastors are spiritually mature and called of God to pastoral ministry and their present place of service. The vast majority of youth pastors have a genuine desire to see lost teenagers meet Jesus, become discipled, and become equipped to fulfill their specific callings.

The youth pastor can be a valuable partner to you as you lead the full church toward substantial changes to make more disciples.

Making many more eighteen-year-old disciples begins with spiritually alive pastors.

Before you take public steps, no doubt you will pray persistently for the leadership of the Holy Spirit in knowing

how to lead teenagers to lifetime faith. And you will invite the Spirit to so refresh your own delight in Christ that you can be an inspiration to a younger generation.

SCRIPTURE

“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” (1 Corinthians 4:16)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Roland Martinson: “Pastors matter immensely in effective youth ministry. And they matter in very specific ways. Pastors lead through their spiritual influence, their pastoral effectiveness, their love for and support of young people, and their support of youth ministry leaders.” (*The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, 206)

Neil Cole: “The first principle for leaving a lasting legacy of multiplication is that it all begins with being a strong disciple yourself. It doesn’t start with what you do but with who you are in Christ.” (*Cultivating a Life for God*, 23)

Neil Cole: “If we can’t see our own lives changed by the power of the gospel, we have no right to expect to see the world changed by our message. If the gospel is not more important to us than life itself, then the world will not be attracted to it. If they don’t see us valuing the gospel, why would we expect them to?” (*Cultivating a Life for God*, 28)

Robby Gallaty: “Every believer should be able to answer two questions. Who am I discipling? And who is discipling me?” (*Growing Up*, 31)

The Senior Pastor and the Description of a Disciple

INTRODUCTION

With the assistance of the youth pastor, you can meet with core leaders, parents, and teenagers to craft a biblical description of an eighteen-year-old disciple of King Jesus. The definition should be steeped in Scripture and should be simple enough that church members can remember it.

You can lead key groups to refine and embrace that definition. Then you can lead the entire church to adopt that description and to commit every church member to making many more of those disciples.

When your church can articulate a clear description of an eighteen-year-old disciple, your fellowship will have taken a crucial step toward creating many more.

SCRIPTURE

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:17–18, NIV)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Eric Geiger and Jeff Borton: “In our observations of student ministries, we discovered that most student ministries have not determined what type of student they seek to build.” (*Simple Student Ministry*, 37)

Eric Geiger and Jeff Borton: “First, discuss what type of student disciple you pray and hope your student ministry produces. The starting point is the end result, the mental picture of what you desire to build.” (*Simple Student Ministry*, 40)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “[I]n order to effectively design a youth ministry that accomplishes God’s mission and vision for the church and produces healthy young disciples, we must establish a ‘target student.’” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 45–46)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Our ‘target student’ should be exceptional, but they shouldn’t be the exception!” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 46)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “If we know the attributes that should characterize a growing disciple who can maintain their personal walk with Christ and fulfill God’s will for their lives, then we should design our ministries in a way that focuses on developing these specific traits.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 46)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Pastors and other youth leaders should determine the theological foundation their students should have when they graduate from their ministries.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 114)

Randy Frazee: “We must adopt from the ancient church and redefine for the postmodern church what a follower of Christ looks like. . . . Whatever the model of spiritual formation, it should be promoted by the spiritual authority of the church, it should be taught at all levels, it should form a common language by which the people of the community speak to one another, and it should be the benchmark against which we examine our lives as an individual and a community.” (Quoted in *Church Unique*, 153–54)

Will Mancini: “Even a small church has so much communication complexity that people won’t catch the measures if the language is not clear and aligned. In fact, it takes consistent use of the same language over three years for the culture to be affected.” (*Church Unique*, 156)

The Senior Pastor and Evangelism

INTRODUCTION

Leading a few teenagers to Christ on church property is wonderful. But if teenagers only hear and respond to the gospel inside a church, most of the next generation will spend their eternity in torment. Senior pastors who know that is true have a decision to make. You have to decide whether you will support and champion getting the gospel out to teenagers in the schools and community.

The acceleration of evangelism of lost teenagers opens the door to making more eighteen-year-old disciples. Evangelizing inside the church, though important, only allows for a meager harvest. Most evangelism must

focus on gospel conversations with the multitudes of teenagers outside the church.

Believing teenagers who observe adults having gospel conversations, receive training, and then begin having such conversations are much more likely to be disciples of Jesus at age eighteen. Living a lifestyle of evangelism is a powerful discipling experience.

SCRIPTURE

Jesus: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:37–38)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Mark Cannister: “While church leaders may feel that the youth ministry needs to reach out to teenagers in the community with the life-saving message of the Gospel, they will almost always tend to appease the voices of parents who desire the youth ministry to nurture the children growing up in the church.” (*YouthWorker Journal, Summer 2017, 31*)

Greg Stier: “When Jesus is your first love, you can’t help but talk about Him. If you fall in love with evangelism, you’ll eventually fizzle out. But if you fall in love—and stay in love—with Jesus, you’ll always evangelize!” (*Gospelize Your Youth Ministry, 147*)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Perhaps the greatest indicator of our students’ spiritual maturity, and thereby the greatest testament to our efforts to disciple them, will be their commitment to share their faith.” (*Student Ministry by the Book, 103*)

Michael McGarry: “When a ministry prioritizes discipleship, evangelism must also be emphasized, for one of the central elements of discipleship is equipping students for evangelism.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry, 163*)

Dave Rahn and Terry Linhart: “The more often adults were observed leading others to Christ, the more often student leaders led their own friends to Christ.” (*Evangelism Remixed, 35*)

Richard Ross: “Ministries may drift in lots of other directions, but they won’t drift toward a priority on evangelism. Introducing teenagers and others to Christ will become a core value only because the pastors have provided genuine, dramatic leadership in that direction.” (*The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry, 73*)

Richard Ross: “Pastors may need to forget the word send. Pastors cannot send teenagers and leaders to share their faith. They only can lead them. They follow in the footsteps of Paul who said, ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:1).” (*The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry, 77*)

Greg Stier: “For teenagers to develop a lifestyle of evangelism, they need to be equipped to share their faith. This includes knowing how to naturally bring up the gospel, explain it clearly, tie in their story, and navigate various responses to the gospel. They also need to learn how to ask great questions and listen deeply to others. . . . Of course, this takes time, prayer, patience and coaching.” (*Quoted in Youth Ministry in the 21st Century*)

Richard Ross: “Most teenage believers are most immersed in relationships for the most number of hours while at school. Their campus thus becomes one of the most natural places for them to tell friends about Jesus.

Prayer, training, and role models give them the courage they need to share. Youth pastors who have hearts for campus impact are essential.” (*The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry*, 84)

The Senior Pastor and Parents

INTRODUCTION

After the church has adopted a description of a young disciple, you can meet with the largest possible number of parents of teenagers. Some churches may choose to gather parents during the Sunday morning Bible teaching hour.

You can lift the eyes of parents to the greatness of Christ. You can fill their hearts with a new gratitude for the gospel and with adoration of Jesus, now enthroned as King of all kings. With eyes and hearts focused on Jesus, you then can share with parents the description of an eighteen-year-old disciple embraced by the congregation. Using Scripture, you can ensure they understand and value each phrase.

For decades, most believing parents have outsourced to the church the spiritual development and discipleship of their children. Therefore, parents today may not know this is their responsibility. You can proclaim Scripture as you call parents to accept their biblical role.

You can invite parents to consider three strategic questions:

1. Given your knowledge of Scripture, what do you believe King Jesus most wants to see when your child is eighteen? In other words, what do you believe Jesus’s highest priorities are for your child at high school graduation?
1. If you join Christ in preparing your child to be a world-changing disciple at age eighteen, how does that impact your family’s present priorities, budget, and schedules? How does that impact prioritizing Sunday morning worship and Bible study?
1. If you agree with King Jesus that following Him takes priority over all other life issues, how can you model that in your own adult life?

Children and teenagers tend to become lifetime disciples when they live with parents who love Jesus, exude Jesus, talk about Jesus, and shape the heart like Jesus. Discipling parents and teaching them how to lead spiritually will take time. But you can start the process by leading parents to make the spiritual lives of their children their highest priority (and not academics, athletics, the arts, etc.).

SCRIPTURE

“We will not conceal them from their children, but tell to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children, that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.” (Psalm 78:4–7, NASB)

“[B]ring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (*Ephesians 6:4, NASB*)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Michael McGarry: “Students whose parents display genuine faith and relational warmth are far more likely to continue in the faith through adulthood than students who attend every youth group event throughout high school but whose parents are spiritually passive.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 161)

Michael McGarry: “Parents have often been told to do with their children what they are not equipped to do because they have never been disciplined themselves.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 8)

Ben Trueblood: “Seventy-two percent of student ministers say they spend an hour or less each week investing in the parents of those in their ministries (*including 23 percent who don’t spend any time with parents*). Fifty-nine percent say they have not disciplined or trained parents as a group. Sixty-seven percent of them say they invest in individual parents every few months or less (*including 28 percent who rarely or never do*).” (*Within Reach*, 40)

Michael McGarry: “The Christian home, therefore, is not simply a place of explicit worship flowing out from Scripture and prayer and singing; it is also an environment where everything in life is filtered and interpreted through a biblical worldview for the glory of God.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 102)

Michael McGarry: “A gospel-centered family views every aspect of family life, from meal-time to matters of discipline and punishment, to help children identify the root-causes of their sin, point them to a holy Heavenly Father who has provided grace for them through Jesus Christ, and to discover their identity in Christ.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 107)

Michael McGarry: “The father is a type of pastor over his family and is responsible to ensure that the home is a place where Christ is loved, known, and honored. It is for this reason that Jonathan Edwards wrote, ‘Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church.’” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 108)

Michael McGarry: “The biblical, historical, theological, and even sociological record is absolutely consistent: parents matter more than youth workers do. This absolutely does not mean youth workers have no influence and should be viewed simply as optional. Instead, it sets the perspective for youth workers who are frequently tempted to overstate their importance while criticizing parents as negligent.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 146)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Life-on-life discipleship occurs more organically through the daily interactions and shared experiences of a family.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 68)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Since a teenager’s parents bear the primary responsibility for their student’s discipleship, a youth pastor’s primary role must then be seen as one that equips and encourages parents in their efforts of spiritual formation.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 69)

Chap Bettis: “God’s desire for your family is to be a Trinity-displaying, God-glorifying, disciple-making unit.” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 6)

Chap Bettis: “Here lies the crux of the matter: The first battleground of family discipleship is not my child’s heart; it is my heart. Each parent must decide whether he is more concerned that his child is accepted into Heaven or ‘Harvard.’” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 17)

Chap Bettis: “Unfortunately, rather than focusing on the heart, too many Christian families focus on behavior management.” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 96)

Chap Bettis: “This is God’s intent—that you would saturate your children with the life-giving, spirit-converting Word of God. We want their testimony when grown to be: ‘I have known the Scriptures from my youngest days. And I love them. They have filled me with wisdom for life that led me to faith in Christ Jesus.’” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 129)

Ben Trueblood: “If you want to make a difference in students’ faith long-term—and help them stay connected to the church when they are on their own—then it’s time to consider yourself a discipler of both parents and students.” (*Within Reach*, 47)

The Senior Pastor and the Congregation

INTRODUCTION

You then can meet with the largest possible number of adults in the congregation. Some churches may choose to gather all adults during the Sunday morning Bible teaching hour.

As with the parents, you can get eyes and hearts focused on Jesus. Then you can review with adults the description of an eighteen-year-old disciple embraced by the church.

You can lead the congregation to value, love, encourage, pray for, and mentor teenagers to see high school graduates who love God, love others, and make disciples for a lifetime. You can call all church members to have some role in building relationships with and spiritually impacting the young.

Because teenagers spend so much of their time in a youth ministry silo, those teenagers often speak of their love for the youth group and seldom speak of their love for the church. Such a situation is troubling. Teenagers who only connect with peers and a few leaders generally will not walk in faith in adulthood. Those who spend eighteen years with multiple heart connections with believers of all ages probably will.

Because the culture is so broken, multitudes of teenagers attend church with no family involvement. Those spiritual orphans have a deep need to be loved, encouraged, and mentored by the church family.

You can call adults to open new doors for teenagers to serve beside them in doing the ministry of the church. The discipleship of the young is accelerated when they know and use their spiritual gifts to join Christ in bringing in His kingdom through the church. In the power of the Holy Spirit, teenagers are the church today as well as into the future.

Young believers have the same Spirit, spiritual gifts, and callings as older adults. Your young people will grow faster when they express some of their ministry and service side by side with the adult church.

SCRIPTURE

“O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come.” (Psalm 71:17–18, NASB)

“Blow a trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children and the nursing infants.” (Joel 2:15–16, NASB)

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (Romans 12:5, NASB)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Richard Ross: “When teenagers are asked to speak at church, they . . . often speak of their love for their Christian friends and seldom speak of their love for the congregation. Things do not look promising for their walk of faith in young adulthood.” (*Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 125)

Mark Howard: “Fostering community within the youth group cannot be an entirely separate endeavor from cultivating the youth’s participation within the wider church. Our failure on this point may be one of the primary reasons why so many youth walk away from church life once they go to college: they never really felt a part of the corporate church community in the first place; they only felt a part of the youth group.” (*Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*, 82)

Richard Ross: “The teenager who looks over the congregation and thinks, ‘These are my people—I belong here’ is most likely to look up and say, ‘You are my God—I belong in your presence.’” (quoted in *Faith for Exiles*, 129)

Scott Wilcher: “if we fail to connect students to the adult church, we undermine their faith development.” (*The Orphaned Generation*, 166)

Chap Clark: “The loss of meaningful relationships with adults has been the most devastating to developing adolescents. . . . [L]oneliness is a central experience.” (*Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, 50)

William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi: “No society that alienates its youth and sets them adrift can continue to exist, for it is already in a state of collapse.” (quoted in *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, 57)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “If our student ministries are isolated from the body, we will reinforce our culture’s mindset of individualism and entitlement. We will also fail to provide the communal context the family of faith is intended to be. As a result, we will produce self-oriented young people who evaluate a church based on how it caters to their preferences, wants, and desires.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 41)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Our student ministries should not be isolated from the rest of the church; they must be integrated with the rest of the church!” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 41)

Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop: “When two people share Christ—even if everything else is different—they are closer than even blood ties could ever bring them. Again, they are the family of God.” (*The Compelling Community*, 26)

Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop: “There are relationships of similarity in the church—and we should be thankful for them. Relationships of similarity offer a level of understanding that is important and unique. But then—and

this is key—there should also be relationships where you're only friends because you're Christians, without any worldly explanation." (*The Compelling Community*, 79)

Ben Trueblood: "Those who stayed in church feel that the people in their church were authentic, caring, forgiving, and worth making role models at a higher rate than those who left. On the other hand, more of those who left the church feel church members were judgmental, disapproving, hypocritical, and insincere than those who stayed." (*Within Reach*, 54)

Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace: "Young people are seeking reasonable explanations and authentic relationships; these are the two inseparable rails that will lead us toward a solution." (*So the Next Generation Will Know*, 37)

Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace: "The heart of a young person is to be known by a caring adult who believes and expresses: You matter to me. I care about you. I will sacrifice to invest in your life to help you be all God has designed you to be." (*So the Next Generation Will Know*, 72)

Michael McGarry: "Youth ministry is for adolescence, the family is for life, but the Church is for eternity." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 4)

Michael McGarry: "When teens are committed more to the youth ministry than to the church, it should be no surprise when many of those teens walk away from their faith after their teen years. In this case, the student's faith commitment was a commitment to that particular Christian community rather than to Christ and the 'new people' community known as the church." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 13)

Michael McGarry: "The next era of ministry to teenagers needs to pursue a more intimate partnership with the church in order to create opportunities for the youth to contribute in meaningful ways to the broader congregation." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 14)

Michael McGarry: "The faithful elders of the Jewish community made it a priority to ensure the children were raised according to the knowledge of God's mighty works for Israel. This was not the sole duty of parents, it was shared between parents and the community of faith." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 30)

Michael McGarry: "As students continue to grow in maturity, they are to be encouraged to put their spiritual gifts to work within the local church, not only in the youth ministry." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 76)

Michael McGarry: "There are many churches whose children and teenagers have separate programs for them during the church's gathered worship service, leading students to never need to join the adults in worship until they graduate high school. In these cases, it is worth asking whether or not these students actually attend church at all." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 86)

Michael McGarry: "What a beautiful expression of the body of Christ it would be for teenagers to be paired with mature Christians in various ministry roles! This would provide much-needed mentoring and discipleship for the teenager while also empowering them for a lifetime of ongoing ministry in the church." (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 89)

Michael McGarry: "Church-based youth ministries often build up their ministries in such a way they are functionally a parachurch ministry that is funded by and hosted by the local church, but there is very little overlap

between the youth ministry and the ministries of the church.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 97)

Michael McGarry: “Because there are no junior members of the Church, gospel-centered youth workers are intentional to ensure teenagers are not merely welcomed at church, but seen as valued contributors.” (*A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 138)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Teenagers are young people who are spiritually accountable before God, liable for their actions, and capable of spiritual growth and maturity. While this does not classify them as seasoned adults who can shoulder life’s responsibilities on their own, it clearly considers teens more as emerging adults than older children.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 21)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Many young people essentially qualify as spiritual orphans and should be ministered to as family members of the local church (*Jas 1:27; cf. Isa 1:17*).” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 37)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Older, mature believers must invest themselves in mentoring relationships with the younger believers who, in turn, subject themselves to the tutelage of the older saints (*2 Tim 2:2*). We must help our students recognize the value of seasoned godliness that previous generations have to offer when they learn with a teachable spirit.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 43)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Encouraging them to sing in the choir, serve as greeters and ushers, minister in the nursery, or contribute in other capacities enables them to grow and mature as capable members of the church now!” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 43)

Ed Newton and Scott Pace: “Integrating students into the life of the church while providing a specialized ministry that addresses their unique needs and learning styles is essential for a student’s spiritual development.” (*Student Ministry by the Book*, 45)

Chap Bettis: “Disciple-making parents actively connect their children to other godly examples.” (*The Disciple-Making Parent*, 56)

Ben Trueblood: “We must no longer be content with baseline attendance. We must equip teenagers to discover and use their gifts to do the work of the ministry.” (*Within Reach*, 95)

Mark Cannister: “Nothing is more reflective of healthy student ministries than students who launch into the full and robust life of the church. In order for this to happen, though, 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.” (*Teenagers Matter*, 117)

Mark Cannister: “For a church to become intergenerational, the whole staff and the whole community, not just the student ministry, must own the initiative. This movement requires more than simply the addition of multigenerational activities. It requires a philosophical shift in the congregation’s understanding of ecclesiology. Establishing intergenerational ministry as a core value necessitates a fresh discussion of the church’s vision, values, and purpose.” (*Teenagers Matter*, 139)

Ben Trueblood: “The number of adults from church who invest in an individual student’s life is one of the strongest predictors of whether a student stayed connected to the church or left after high school.” (*Within Reach*, 26)

The Senior Pastor and Student Ministry Leadership

INTRODUCTION

You can meet with student ministry leaders and then review with them the description of an eighteen-year-old disciple embraced by the full congregation.

You then can discuss with the leaders:

- Are we investing time, effort, or resources in activities that do not help us create eighteen-year-old disciples?
- Can we gently move away from activities that do not help us make disciples?
- As we consider making eighteen-year-old disciples, are there gaps in our preparations?
- Can we transfer time, effort, or resources from activities that do not make disciples to those activities that do?

You can call student ministry leaders to intentionally and systematically disciple teenagers in accountable, grace-filled, life-on-life relationships, built around biblical content—leading to high school graduates who love God, love others, and make disciples for a lifetime.

These intensive discipleship groups are for those specific teenagers who desire to follow Jesus. Such groups create more eighteen-year-old disciples. Intensive discipleship groups complement open Bible study groups that teach foundational biblical content and are open to all.

You can call leaders to guide teenagers to form multiple heart connections with the members of the congregation, to worship with the full church on the Lord's Day, and to involve teenagers in the ministries of the full church.

Finally, you can call leaders to spend somewhat less time isolated in the youth ministry silo so teenagers can spend more time with families and the full congregation.

SCRIPTURE

"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John." (Mark 9:2)

"And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James." (Luke 8:51)

"Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us." (1 Thessalonians 2:8, NASB)

INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

Dallas Willard: "A simple goal for the leaders of a particular group would be to bring all those in attendance to understand clearly what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and to be solidly committed to discipleship in their whole life." (*Renovation of the Heart*, 244)

David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock: “One of the most hopeful findings in our research is this: young exemplar Christians are more willing to be challenged than the church is willing to challenge them.” (*Faith for Exiles*, 51)

David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock: “[B]ut many young people . . . are dutiful churchgoers while remaining otherwise spiritually inert. Church involvement is a necessary but insufficient condition for resilient discipleship.” (*Faith for Exiles*, 63)

Richard Ross: “Churches that only provide open Bible study groups and no [intensive discipleship] groups must consider some important questions: . . . How do we dramatically increase the number of high school graduates who adore Christ, live out of gratitude for the Gospel, take responsibility for their own spiritual growth, articulate what they believe and why, know how to disciple others, sacrifice for the poor, live to take the Good News to the nations and the hard places in the U.S., and impact churches, business, entertainment, and government?” (*Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 188)

Richard Ross: “Churches who only offer open groups must ask themselves this central question: ‘After a year in open groups (*with limited life-on-life investment and interaction*), are we seeing most teenagers looking more and more like Jesus?’ If the answer is no, then creating a discipling option beyond open groups may make sense.” (*The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry*, 95)

Bill Hull: “When churches offer only open groups, with people at various spiritual levels gathering in the same groups, mediocrity will result.” (*The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 233–34)

Robby Gallaty: “So what is the ideal size of a [discipleship group]? In my experience, four total, as displayed by Jesus, is the number of choice. Any more than five, including you, is too large, and any less than three is too small.” (*Growing Up*, 47)

Greg Ogden: “My conviction is that the primary way people grow into self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ is by being involved in highly accountable, relational, multiplying discipleship units of three or four.” (*Transforming Discipleship*, 54)

Richard Ross: “What one-on-three disciplers are doing is biblical and effective, growing disciples through relationships while sharing life.” (*Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 187)

Action Questions

How will prayer saturate the process as your church seeks to make many more young disciples?

Will the senior pastor take the lead role in guiding the church to make changes that could result in making many more young disciples?

How will the senior pastor and student pastor become partners and not adversaries during the process of change?

Who are the stakeholders who should be part of early conversations about making changes?

What group will do the first work on a description of an eighteen-year-old disciple?

Which individuals or groups will refine and then affirm that description before presenting it to the full congregation?

Who will lead teenagers, parents, leaders, and the congregation to understand that teenagers who spend somewhat less time in a youth ministry silo, and somewhat more time connected to families and the full church, are more likely to become eighteen-year-old disciples?

Who will guide the process of revising the youth pastor's job description in light of church changes?

Who will lead teenagers, parents, leaders, and the congregation to understand and embrace the youth pastor's revised job description so that the church can celebrate his work?

What metrics will pastors use to evaluate their progress toward making more young disciples?

On what dates will pastors evaluate the progress they are making toward developing more young disciples?

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