

THE STATE OF YOUTH

RESULTS OF THE BIGGEST, BADDEST SURVEY OF YOUTH WORKERS EVER DONE—WE PAINT THE MOST DETAILED PICTURE YET OF WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON IN YOUTH MINISTRY TODAY. AND WE ASK SOME REALLY SMART PEOPLE TO PAINT A PICTURE OF THE FUTURE.

I know your first burning question about “The State of Youth Ministry” is, of course: “Is that anywhere near Wyoming?” And after that, you must have a million lesser questions. And a million is too many to ask, so we cut that number down to 15 and then asked youth pastors all over the world to give us their feedback. ¹ Our goal: to give youth leaders a chance to talk about ministry as it is, and will be.

So what we have here is a wide-scale attempt to “take the temperature” of youth ministry—it’s the first I’ve seen in my 21 years as editor of *group*. To complement these groundbreaking survey results, I asked a diverse group of influential leaders to stare into their crystal balls and then...smash them with a hammer, *because that’s akin to witchcraft!* So after they cleaned up the broken crystal, I asked them each to simply offer their best take on what the future of youth ministry might look like, from their perch.

In this issue, we’ll tackle about half of the questions we asked. In our March/April issue we’ll focus on the remaining questions—those will include:

- What’s one thing you’d like to see change in youth ministry overall?
- What’s one thing you suspect others just “don’t get” about effective youth ministry?
- What’s one thing you think is overrated in youth ministry today?

27.9%
6-10 YEARS IN MINISTRY

¹ Our State of Youth Ministry survey had 639 respondents from all over the world. About a third of them (29.1%) are between 21 and 30 years old, about another third (34.8%) are between 31 and 40 years old. A quarter of them (23.7%) are

between 41 and 50 years old, and about one in 10 (12.3%) are over 51. They belong to a wide array of denominations—more respondents from the usual suspects (Non-Denominational Evangelical, Baptist, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, United

Methodist) and fewer from the usual suspects (Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Roman Catholic). The breakdown for how long they’ve been in youth ministry looks like this:

3–5 years.....	21.1%
6–10 years	27.9%
11–15 years	20.1%
16–20 years	10.4%
21–25 years	6.7%
26–30 years.....	4.5%
31≠35 years	1.5%
More than 35 years	0.2%

by rick lawrence

MINISTRY

■ What's one thing you think is underrated in youth ministry today?

■ What's the hardest thing you have to overcome in your attempts to build an effective youth ministry?

■ What's one thing you really love about today's teenagers?

■ What's one thing you struggle with about today's teenagers?

So on with the show...er...survey.

1 HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR WORK IN YOUTH MINISTRY RIGHT NOW?

Very Satisfied	18.6%
Mostly Satisfied.....	65.9%
Mostly Dissatisfied	12.9%
Very Dissatisfied.....	2.5% >>>



2 WHAT ARE THE CHANCES YOU'LL STILL BE INVOLVED IN YOUTH MINISTRY FIVE YEARS FROM NOW?

Definitely	40.1%
Probably	33.9%
Not Sure.....	18.5%
Probably Not	5.7%
Definitely Not	1.8%

3 WHAT'S THE MOST LIKELY REASON YOU'D EVER LEAVE YOUTH MINISTRY? (Mark only one)

Moving into a new ministry role..	28.4%
Getting too old for it.....	13.3%
Burnout.....	9.1%
Lack of measurable results.....	6.9%
Tired of being away from family....	6.4%
Little encouragement/ affirmation	3.9%

Pay is too low	3.2%
Stress is too much	2.6%
Conflicts with other staffers.....	2.1%
Moving into secular work force	1.1%
Conflicts with parents	0.5%

4 WHAT ARE YOU REALLY "DYING FOR" IN YOUR MINISTRY? After reading through 15 pages of responses to this one, I grouped common responses together in 10 broad categories to get a big-picture view of what youth pastors are saying about their most pressing needs. Here they are, in order of how often they were mentioned:

More and Better Volunteers

Sample Comment: "I'm really needing not just volunteers, but volunteer leaders—people who can take charge and make things happen. I have plenty of help, but not many leaders. I'm really trying to focus on

200,000

VOLUNTEERS

There are about 60,000 full-time, paid youth pastors in America (give or take 5,000), and another 20,000 part-time, paid youth workers. With about 340,000 churches in the U.S., that means there are likely a couple hundred thousand volunteers who are leading a youth ministry.



photo by sarah collins

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY by kenda creasy dean

EXPAND THE UMBRELLA

In seminary, I was the only person I knew who wanted to do youth ministry *on purpose*. In the 1980s, youth ministry was mostly a vocational accident. But some who God called “accidentally” developed the more robust, theologically sophisticated approaches that now set the standard for our vocation. Today’s youth ministers are more professional, more diverse, better prepared, better paid, and consequently more long-lasting than ever.

Young people, however, are sending us mixed

signals. Religiously devoted teenagers are “doing better” than their nonreligious peers on just about every sociological variable—but these youth represent fewer than half (40 percent) of American young people, and only 8 percent are what sociologists call “highly devoted.” These are the young people that churches understand best and address most effectively. Even with more experienced youth workers, the number of teenagers in North American churches is declining, and their faith

often fails to make the jump into emerging adulthood.

So what does this mean?

The days when youth ministry focused only on teenagers are over. Since youth mirror the faith of the adults who love them, parents and congregations need sustained and intentional models for Christian maturity. Parents are key, but research also links adolescent faith maturity to the support of the lead pastor, followed by other faithful adults who are willing to invest in teenagers. In the future, youth ministry must:

1 LEVERAGE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH MINISTRY AND MISSION.

We need to stop thinking about mission as a “trip,” “activity,” or “model” of ministry instead of as the church’s core identity. When we invite young people to participate alongside us in the practices of a congregation, is our goal to make church more interesting or to equip them as Christ’s envoys in the world?

2 EMBRACE EMERGING ADULTS.

A generation ago, youth ministry expanded to include young adolescents. Now 21 is the new 16—identity formation has extended into emerging adulthood, a phase largely

leadership development.”

■ **Teenagers Who Are Engaged and Passionate About Their Faith**

Sample Comment: “I am dying for teenagers who are ready to willingly commit their lives to die for Jesus Christ today, and who are willing to be the ones to speak about Christ to their school peers, coaches, teachers, parents, and families!”

■ **More Effective Discipleship Strategies**

Sample Comment: “I’m dying for a balance [with] service/evangelism, head knowledge, and surrender. We seem to focus on the first two, but miss the heart. We emphasize outward devotion when inward devotion is what’s important (read the gospels and you’ll see what I mean!).”

■ **More Practical Resources**

Sample Comment: “Many of the resources available are too shallow,

make a point that’s unnecessary, or overemphasize the teacher’s role in the learning process. More creative, exploratory curriculum choices would make learning available for all levels of spiritual maturity in students.”

■ **Better Ways to Involve and Equip Parents**

Sample Comments: “I’m dying for more supportive parents as we build the program” and “I’m dying for parents to see the connection between how they live their faith and how kids imitate what they live.”

■ **A Greater Emphasis and “Battle Plan” for Outreach**

Sample Comment: “[I’m dying] to see young people grow in the Lord and begin to invest in others spiritually. One goal we have is for each student to lead one person to the Lord by the time they graduate from high school.”

■ **Money and Supplies**

Sample Comments: “The total truth is that I need funds for youth ministry” and “I am really dying for another MacBook Pro” and “Coverage for my mileage” and “I am dying to give my youth a room that is theirs!”

■ **Time Management**

Sample Comment: “I need more time! I love everything I do, but there’s too much of it. I’d love to study more, spend more time with teens, more time with parents, more time teaching,

more time doing evangelism, etc.”

■ **More Help With Worship**

Sample Comment: “Our students have not had the opportunity or experience of genuine, “no holds barred” worship. I’d love to have guidance on introducing my kids to free worship.”

■ **Better Connections With the Wider Church**

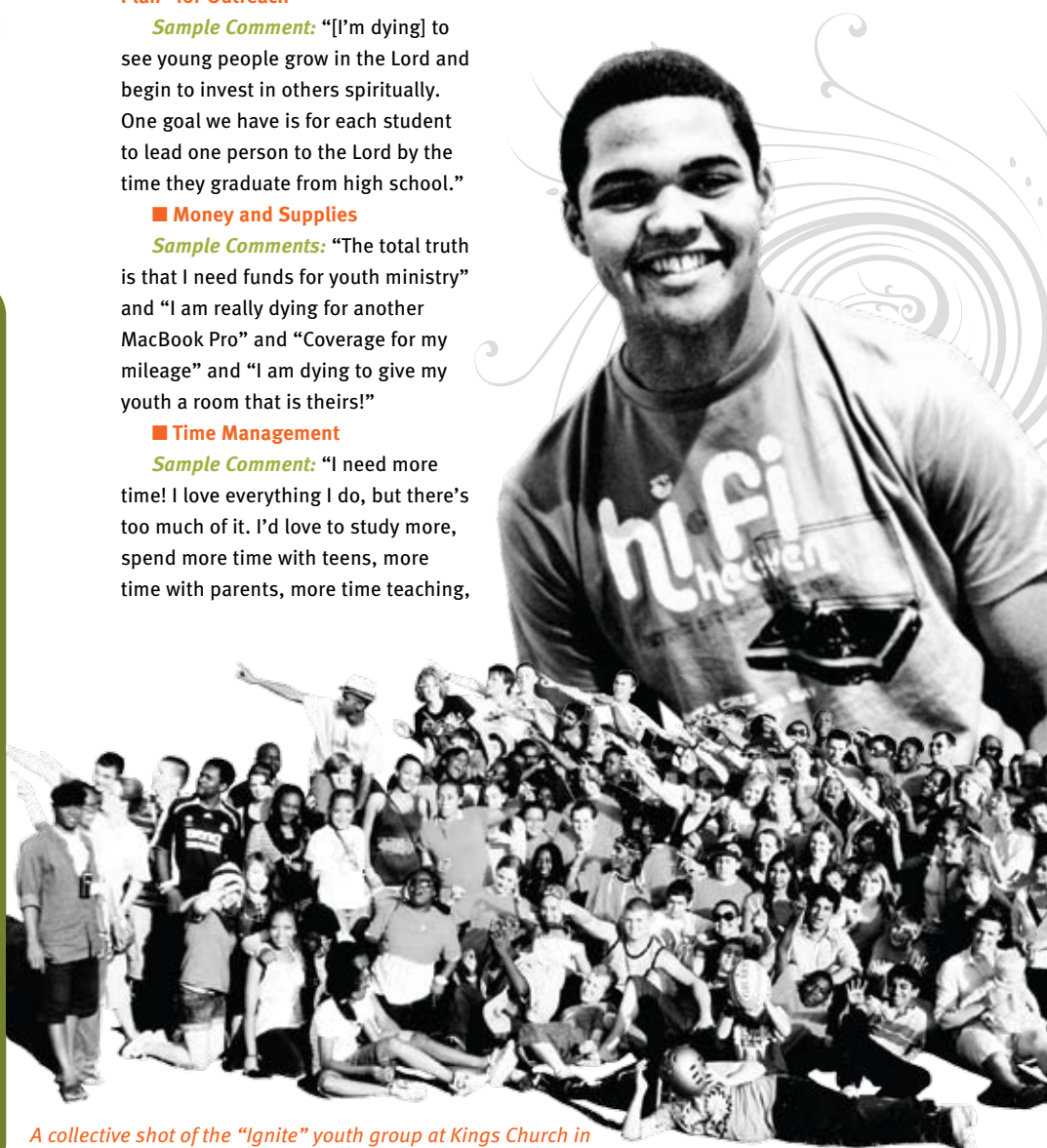
Sample Comment: “[I’m dying for] a vision of the larger body of Christ and [kids’] place in it, along with a desire and ability to connect with adults on a spiritual level that will see them through the rest of their lives.” >>>

ignored by U.S. institutions, including churches.

3 MEET THE “UNCHRISTIAN” CHALLENGE.

Youth ministry will have to radically expand its umbrella to cover teens who are non-Christian (of another or no faith) or unChristian (David Kinnaman’s term for youth who believe in God but don’t identify narrowly with Christianity). ■

Kenda is a pastor, parent, and associate professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. She’s just written *Worshipping at the Church of “Benign Whatever-ism”* (Oxford).



A collective shot of the “Ignite” youth group at Kings Church in London, part of a missional church-planting movement called *Newfrontiers* that started in the U.K. but is now international.

photos by **michael nyffeler**

»» 5 WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY, WHAT'S GOING "REALLY WELL"?

For this one the comments are so varied and hard to connect that I thought I'd list the responses that seemed particularly interesting, insightful, or representative to me:

■ **"Anything that includes parents,** teaching the Bible (versus teaching about morals), and encourages experiential learning."

■ **"Teens willing to do right even if those around them are not—**rising above peer pressure."

■ **"Building trust.** I have been at this congregation for four years, and parents and students are beginning to 'buy into' our youth ministry and are willing to share their 'real' thoughts and concerns about their lives."

■ **"Connecting with the students.** The adult and student leaders have a different outlook on ministry than we did three years ago. Every person is seen for who they are, what they need, and how those needs can be met."

■ **"Current research and practical applications** as it relates to youth trends and events."

■ **"it's the quality of my leadership team** and their buy-in to the vision and

mission God's laid before us."

■ **"Discipleship through small group ministry,** and organized mission opportunities."

■ **"Helping kids face their pain** through our small group ministry."

■ **"Our kids are most energized when they are serving others.** Our service opportunities in the community and around the country have been greatly successful and bring so much energy to the church."

■ **"I think the students are starting to understand life with Christ as a journey** and getting the idea of plugging into God's story."

■ **"I would say we have developed a strong evangelistic edge in our ministry...One** where students are reaching out to their peers."

■ **"Students here have a chance to take ownership of 'their' ministry.** On Sunday mornings our kids lead worship with a band; run media, sound, lights; and give announcements, among other things."

■ **"Our trips and retreats** are our most impactful connection pieces."

■ **"Parental involvement.** We ask the parents to attend the youth meetings with their teenagers. Last

year we had 98 percent parental participation on our big youth retreat."

■ **"The 'safe' atmosphere that we've created within our youth group—**where kids feel free to share and process through life stuff even with more than 50 people in the room!"

6 WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY, WHAT'S NOT GOING "REALLY WELL"?

Again, the comments on this one are all over the board, so I've chosen a handful that seem to represent the widest swath (the first two comments represent, by far, the top complaints):

■ **"Winning the battle against culture—**I mean, competition with soccer, other priorities, and so on."

■ **"Apathy from some of the youth and their parents.** With so much going on for school and traveling teams, they have no time for church, youth groups, and even family time. Kids are getting pulled in so many directions, and some of my parents don't see the priority of our youth ministry."

■ **"Communication—**I haven't found the best way to market events. I always have kids and parents saying,

volunteers,

"I'M REALLY NEEDING NOT JUST BUT VOLUNTEER LEADERS—PEOPLE WHO CAN TAKE CHARGE AND MAKE THINGS HAPPEN."



photo by michael nyffeler



photo by sarah collins

“We wish we wouldve known about it.”

■ **“Designing studies that are relevant to their lives**—ones that are in touch with who they are, what they want, and how they see the world.”

■ **“Evangelistic efforts by students.** Many are discouraged with their friendship group not responding to the gospel, or others do not have the personal passion for Christ to take relational risks in evangelistic efforts.”

■ **“Faith formation in the home.** Parents are not doing the job they ought to in discipling their children.”

■ **“Adult involvement.** Everyone seems to want to have these programs, but there are not many adults willing to put in some time.”

■ **“Giving to our ministry is down,** requiring us to fund-raise, taking time away from ministry.”

■ **“Helping students live for Christ consistently in all areas of life.** Getting them to bring God’s Word with them into everyday life.”

■ **“I do not know how to deal with behavior issues.** I don’t want to run them off, but they keep me from

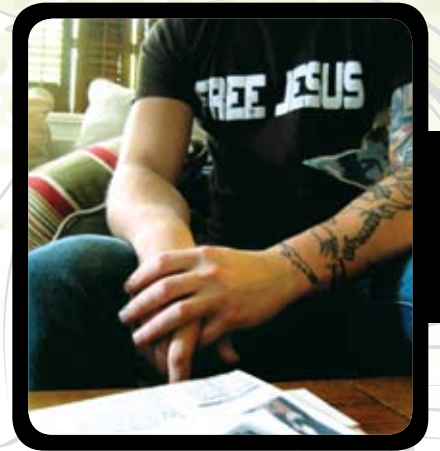


photo by sarah collins

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY by doug fields

3 THINGS I SEE

I’m reluctant to write my thoughts on the “state of youth ministry”—honestly, I’d struggle to write about the “state of my garage” because it’s so messy and complex. That’s a good description of youth ministry, by the way. It’s so big and my perspective is so small. But here’s what I see...

1 HURTING, LONELY, TIRED, AND UNDER-APPRECIATED YOUTH WORKERS.

As youth ministry has professionalized (seminary degrees and training events) and churned out many more resources (books, Web sites, DVDs), our important role has been validated. Today many of us call ourselves lifers who can count on a supportive youth ministry infrastructure. As youth ministry has matured, it’s become much more than providing entertainment for church kids and hoping they’ll discover Jesus. We know ministry health includes soul care, family ministry, developing leaders, and so on.

But while youth ministry is more professional, churches have not yet recognized the crucial need to nurture healthy youth workers. Many youth workers are decimated by unrealistic expectations, infighting, and neglect from church leadership. Our training and resource focus must shift to a strategic equipping mind-set for the church.

2 A SHIFTING CULTURE THAT’S MOVING SO FAST THAT THE AVERAGE YOUTH WORKER CAN’T KEEP UP WITH ITS PACE AND CHANGE.

We need the supporting cast of smart culture-watchers to help us navigate the ocean kids swim in. And we need that help offered to us in humility—not couched in terms that make us feel stupid or guilty for not being able to keep up. For years I’ve relied on people such as Walt Mueller (CPYU.org) to help me better understand what’s happening around me. I need Walt and others (researchers, seminary professors) to help me understand *what* is happening *and* offer ideas on what I can do about it. Anyone can point to the bad stuff in culture—we need something we can use!

3 TEENAGERS WHO WANT TO BE IN COMMUNITY AND ARE ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE TO BE FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS OF JESUS.

Teenagers are hungry for community. They’re less interested in being entertained, preferring meaningful conversations about their feelings, their gay friends, their inability to live out the sermons they’re hearing, and how to get along with others. These are the same conversations I’ve heard for 30 years (with the exception of the gay friends topic).

Teenagers are different, but the same. They want to be liked by others, they don’t want to be alone, they want something more in life, they’re intrigued by Jesus, and they’ve got a lot of questions about stuff they’re hearing at church and school. They’re also convinced they can make a difference! That’s one reason why I love the “present state” of youth ministry and am hopeful about its “future state.” ■

doug is the pastor of life development for children, youth, and college at Saddleback Church in California. He’s the author of more than 40 books and the founder of Simply Youth Ministry.





» focusing on the other 99 percent of the kids.”

■ **“I’m frustrated with the same-old, same-old youth group meeting.** Play a game, hang out, have a lesson. It doesn’t challenge kids.”

■ **“Me! I’m stretched.** I own and work a full-time business (23 years). I go to seminary classes. I volunteer as youth minister. It’s too much.”

■ **“Outreach is met with hostility** from the kids in local schools.”

■ **“Sustainable faith practices.** What do they have with them that they can take when they graduate?”

7 WHAT’S ONE GOOD CHANGE YOU’VE SEEN IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?

Again, the breadth of answers to this question is astonishing. But it was also much easier for me to group these responses under like umbrellas:

■ **“An attention to family ministry—**putting teens’ spiritual development back with the parents.”

■ **“A hunger among students for ‘deeper’ things”** and “A move away from ‘flash’ toward substance.”

■ **“A transition from a preaching style of youth ministry** to a more interactive and relational style.”

■ **“All our area youth ministries are working together,** for the sake of the kingdom—not just for ourselves.”

■ **“Many going on mission trips.”**

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY **by mark oestreicher**

FROM AUTONOMY TO AFFINITY AND BEYOND

shifted away from a focus on identity toward *autonomy*. Youth culture defined itself against the wider culture—to find its independence. Youth ministries responded with new, more relational and programmatic ideas, building “youth groups” that fueled autonomy.

God is doing great things in the lives of teenagers, through all kinds of youth ministries. But I’m more certain than ever that we’re missing the mark. I think our assumptions about effective youth ministry are dated; our efforts are well-intentioned, but not getting the results we long for.

Adolescence has always been like hitting the pause button between the play of childhood and the expectations of adulthood. It’s a chance to wrestle with three issues:

- 1 Identity: “Who am I?”
- 2 Autonomy: “What is the extent of my control?”
- 3 Affinity: “To whom and where do I belong?”

My contention is that the way we prioritize these three adolescent tasks has shifted over the past 60 years—since youth culture has been a normal part of North American life.

In the ’50s and ’60s, the priority (or the long leg of a three-legged stool) was *identity*. Youth ministries in this epoch responded appropriately, helping this emerging demographic (teenagers) to collect itself.

In the ’70s and ’80s and well into the ’90s, youth culture

But youth culture has shifted again. Just before the turn of the millennium, youth culture splintered into subsets, all with their own norms, language, values, style, and rules.

So far, we’re largely approaching Youth Culture 3.0 with a Youth Ministry 2.0 mind-set. The long leg of the three-legged stool these days is *affinity*. Belonging has become the adolescent task *through which* the other tasks (identity, autonomy) are worked out. But we’re mostly built for autonomy, not affinity. Our focus is less about casting the wide net of belonging and more about undergirding our independent status. To stay true to our calling, we must discern what a ministry steeped in belonging looks like. ■

mark is the president of Youth Specialties, a longtime youth leader, and the author of many books, including *Youth Ministry 3.0* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties). For an expanded plunge into affinity-focused youth ministry, pick up a copy of his book.



■ “An emergence of different styles of worship that appeal to youth.”

■ “Becoming more focused on Jesus and leading kids to him rather than a focus on entertaining them with games and events.”

■ “Connection and insight into youth’s lives through the Internet.”

■ “Figuring out how to do student leadership development better.”

■ “We’re moving toward a small group youth ministry. In four years we’ve gone from 30 percent small group involvement to closer to 65 percent, with a goal to hit 100 percent.”

■ “I’ve seen kids become more aware of social justice. They care about the world.”

■ “More youth pastors are in it for good, not just ‘training’ to become a senior pastor.”

■ “There are so many free resources” and “The resources have greatly improved.”

■ “Leaders staying in their jobs longer.”

■ “Incorporating pop culture into teaching, which is very relevant.”

in our next issue I’ll tackle the remaining eight questions. Here’s a teaser: In answer to my question “What’s one thing you’d like to see change in youth ministry?” one youth pastor said, “Churches not expecting couples to work for the salary of one person.” ■

rick has been editor of **group**

Magazine for 21 years. You can contact him at rlawrence@group.com. And you can get a copy of his book *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry* or his 10-week study *In Pursuit of Jesus* at youthministry.com.



**WANT
EVEN
MORE?**

Now that you’ve sampled our State of Youth Ministry report, check out Group’s “State of...” reports on:

- Children’s Ministry,
- Women’s Ministry, and
- Volunteer Ministry.

Just go to group.com/church09

Groups
**STATE
of the
CHURCH
2009**



THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY **by christian smith**

A SOCIOLOGIST’S 3 IMPERATIVES 3 IMBEVATIVES?

I view youth ministry from the limited perspective of a sociological researcher. I see a lot of good stuff happening out there. Lots of serious, committed youth ministers and volunteers are investing themselves into the lives of their youth in ways that make a real difference.

I am impressed.

At the same time, many churches seem to have only halfhearted commitments to their youth. Adults often fail to relationally engage teenagers adequately and to put the financial resources into youth ministry staff and programs. Also, what is in fact a weak market for paid youth ministers seems to be accompanied by an inadequate supply of professional youth ministers available for hire—I know of good churches with open full-time positions which, amazingly, can’t find the right people to fill them. The cycle of incapacity needs to be broken by both greater demand for and supply of top-quality, paid youth ministers.

Youth ministry today also seems hindered by adversarial relationships >>>

YUGO MINISTRIES
Lamentations 3:27
**Your First Choice For
Mexico Ministries**

Week-long Evangelistic Outreaches
Home Building
Medical/Dental Clinics
Family Ministries
Church Building
Children’s Home Ministry
Christmas Shoebox Ministry
Summer Internships
Second Careers for Retirees

Whatever your passion, YUGO has more than 40 years of experience, connecting North American churches with ministry opportunities in Mexico!

Contact us for
more information at:
(909) 592-6621
outreach.yugo.org
www.yugo.org

» between youth ministers and parents. I understand the reasons—but it will never do. Parents need to be brought on board and made positive contributors.

As to big-picture strategy, youth ministry seems to be in a state of flux

and uncertainty now. Youth pastors don't seem confident that standard methods are still the best, or in knowing which alternatives to explore. I sense an uneasiness about the larger vision of the youth ministry project.

So what needs to happen?

1 PARENTS NEED TO BE EDUCATED AND EQUIPPED TO TAKE THE LEAD IN THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THEIR OWN CHILDREN.

They need to know the window of influence that's briefly open to them will close more quickly than they realize, and other lesser commitments can distract them from this primary responsibility.

2 GROUPS IN CHURCHES WHO ARE INVESTED IN YOUTH MINISTRY COULD PRESS THEIR CHURCH LEADERS HARDER FOR GREATER PERSONAL AND RESOURCE INVESTMENTS INTO YOUTH.

Youth ministers need to be paid enough to make the job something the best people can stick with for the long haul. And they need the kind of job description that allows them to spend lots of time with teenagers—there is absolutely no substitute for spending time with youth and sticking to it for a long time.

3 FINALLY, YOUTH NEED TO BE SKILLFULLY TAUGHT THE ACTUAL CONTENT OF THEIR FAITH, STRAIGHT UP, AND NOT SIMPLY HAVE IT "SLIPPED IN" BETWEEN FUN EVENTS.

With all of this in place, *maybe* we stand a chance against the countervailing forces. ■

Christian

is the director of the *National Study of Youth and Religion*, co-author of *Soul Searching*, and a Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame University.



Let Your Group Soar for a Higher Calling...

Whether you want to use the great outdoors to teach core life lessons or simply take a time out from the day to day, ACE's 1,400-acre Adventure Resort is designed to meet your group's goals and fellowship needs.

Our resort features gathering and dining facilities, group lodging, and outdoor adventure initiatives from rafting and rock climbing to canopy tours and mountain biking.

**A World of
Adventure
in One Place™**

Join us for an adventure of a lifetime!
Call now for a FREE DVD and full color Catalog!
New River Gorge, WV

ACE Adventure Resort

800-787-3982

www.Group.AceRaft.com