

YOUTH MINISTRY AS MISSION

Amber Livermore

This article considers the implications of approaching youth ministry from a missiological perspective, enhancing the receptivity of youth to the Gospel and mobilising them as partners in God's mission. The goal of a missional youth ministry is defined as 'To make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God, actively partnering in God's mission and appropriately developing into maturity within the context of an intimate, multi-generational church community.' These goals are divided into two sequential categories: reaching youth and releasing youth. Challenges to reaching youth are identified and a number of strategies offered for the meeting of such challenges. A case study drawn from the Aotearoa New Zealand context is provided.

I. Introduction

In a time when youth ministry has become highly specialised, ministering to young people is often left to professional youth workers. Certainly there is a need for those people who have committed themselves vocationally to the development of young people, but a proper understanding of youth ministry reveals that students require the active influence of multiple Christian adults in their lives. While reaching youth with the Gospel and releasing them into partnership in God's work in the world may appear to be the job description of a youth pastor, this is actually part of the commission to and mission of the local church as a whole.

It is important to acknowledge that the spiritual formation of young people is primarily the responsibility of parents. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 makes this clear: 'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'¹ This passage communicates that godly parents are responsible for partnering in God's mission to reach their own children. However, Scripture also teaches that the local church community takes on

¹ All Scripture references are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

some of this familial responsibility. Thus, Paul is able to write to Timothy as his 'true son in the faith' in I Timothy 1:2. Also, local churches have the opportunity to minister to youth who come from non-Christian families. With these things in mind, this article will focus on the local church community and its youth programmes, specifically considering what understanding youth ministry as mission means for all Christian adults in a local church community.

The term 'youth' often refers to those in the life stage of adolescence. It has been said that adolescence begins with puberty and ends with culture.² In other words, 'youth' is a culturally defined term. Adolescence can be defined functionally as, 'the [time period between the] onset of puberty to the assumption of adult responsibilities (socially, legally, and economically).'³ In today's society, the adolescent stage of life sometimes extends well into a person's twenties. However, this article will consider 'youth' to generally refer to people between puberty (approximately 11-13 years old) and the age of nineteen.⁴

In order to pursue youth ministry as mission, it is important to define the missional goal of a local church youth ministry. I propose that the goal of a missional youth ministry is, '(1) To make disciples of Jesus Christ who are (2) authentically walking with God, (3) actively partnering in God's mission and appropriately developing into maturity, (4) within the context of an intimate, multi-generational church community.'⁵ These goals can be divided into two sequential categories: *reaching youth* and *releasing youth*.

II. Reaching Youth

When considering 'Reaching Youth,' the first two parts of the goal of missional youth ministry will be considered: '(1) To make disciples of Jesus Christ who are (2) authentically walking with God...' In his article, 'Cross-Cultural Outreach: A Missiological Perspective on Youth Ministry,' Paul Borthwick makes the case that youth ministry

² Chap Clark, *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), ch. 2.

³ Keith Puffer, 'Adolescent Growth and Development' lecture at Indiana Wesleyan University, 29 January, 2005.

⁴ 'Young people,' 'teenagers,' and 'students' will also be used in the same general sense.

⁵ Adapted from Chap Clark, *When Kids Hurt: Help for Adults Navigating the Adolescent Maze* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 191.

possesses every trait of cross-cultural mission work.⁶ The generally accepted lifestyle, perspectives and values of adults in a given community are not necessarily shared by the youth in that same community. In other words, a cross-cultural mission field walks right in the church doors any time a young person does. In order effectively to reach youth with the Gospel, caring adults must take on the role of cross-cultural missionaries.

A. Missiological Foundation

When Christian adults become missionaries to young people in their own communities, like all missionaries, they must recognise and seek to understand the unique culture of the people they are trying to reach. This involves 'doing their homework' to better understand the youth in their communities.

The 'backdrop' of youth culture can be found in the most distinguishing factor of adolescence: change. The changes of adolescence have only just begun at puberty and are not limited to the physical. A young person is in a constant state of changing. Psychosocially, the intense transition from childhood to adulthood involves a new questioning of and searching for personal identity.⁷ Cognitively, neurological research shows that the human brain does not fully develop until people reach their mid-twenties.⁸ Thus, a young person's brain is constantly changing, and they are often only able to focus on their immediate experience.⁹ While much more time could be given to this 'backdrop' of youth culture, it is sufficient for now to realise that youth culture is inherently influenced by a season of questioning, constant change, and the need for wise input from the adult world.

After understanding the 'backdrop' of adolescence, missionaries to young people must consider current influential factors on youth culture. A few current key factors include advances in technology and media, the presence of extreme variety in 'youth culture' and the phenomenon of 'systemic abandonment.'

⁶ Paul Borthwick, 'Cross-Cultural Outreach: A Missiological Perspective on Youth Ministry,' *Christian Education Journal*, 3 NS, 1999.

⁷ Clark, *Starting Right*, ch. 2.

⁸ Joe S. McIlhaney, Jr., MD and Freda McKissic Bush, MD, *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting our Children* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008), 51.

⁹ Merrilyn Withers, 'Youth Ministry Today,' *New Vision: New Zealand Vol. IV* (Auckland: MissionKoru, 2011), 260.

Incredible developments in technology today have a great influence on youth. Merrilyn Withers, professor of youth ministry at Carey Baptist College and National Youth Consultant for the Baptist Union of NZ, expressed it well when she wrote:

Adolescence has always been a time of huge change, challenge and development, but in a world getting busier, more technologically centred, and more socially fragmented, many of those challenges are being exacerbated. We are now working with a teenage generation which is hugely, media-saturated, convenience-oriented, entertainment-focused, and short-term committed. The constant media bombardment leaves little time for reflection, an intolerance for the ordinary or boring, a shorter attention span, and a higher value on fun and entertainment as giving life significance.¹⁰

These drastic changes in technology, and therefore way of life, form a natural divide between the way older generations and today's youth 'do life.'¹¹ Also, with constant access to media, including social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, youth are exchanging and receiving information at an incredible rate. This means that the culture of young people itself can evolve at a ridiculously fast pace. Thus, adults can become even more quickly cut off from such a technologically savvy and oriented generation. While it would be nearly impossible to keep up with all the trends and changes, missionaries to youth can refresh their general knowledge of mainstream popular culture through a few minutes spent on Google. A lot can be gained by simply looking up current top songs/artists, hit movies, best selling adolescent fiction, and popular videos on YouTube.

The variety in 'youth culture' proves to be a rather tricky factor. The very terminology of 'youth culture' is slightly deceptive. The culture of an individual young person is formed through the mixture of many cultural ingredients, including their ethnicity and family background. Many young people belong to youth sub-cultures that are drastically different from each another. Within those sub-cultures, some youth are very committed to the group's distinct values, while others may only wear the associated clothing and listen to the culturally-approved music. Still, other youth would not

¹⁰ Withers, 'Youth Ministry Today,' 257.

¹¹ Lloyd Martin, *The Invisible Table: Perspectives on Youth and Youthwork in New Zealand* (North Shore: Cengage Learning, 2009), 53.

identify themselves with any specific sub-culture.¹² All this means that there is no such entity as *the* youth culture of today; while missionaries to young people can seek understanding of general trends, the culture of a particular individual or group of young people will vary drastically even within the same community, youth group, or class room. Missionaries must take on the role of learners before they aspire to teach.¹³ Youth listen to popular culture because they feel pop culture 'listens' to them; however, youth feel greatly unheard by the adult world and specifically by the Church.¹⁴ Thus, Christian adults must learn to observe, ask questions and listen. Also, they must respect the fact that an individual is much more complex than just his or her culture.

According to experienced youth workers in both New Zealand and the United States, the sense of youth being 'cut off' from the adult generation is possibly the strongest commonality among youth cultures. Chap Clark in his book *Hurt* describes this phenomenon as 'systemic abandonment.'¹⁵ His theory is that youth generally feel abandoned by the adult world.¹⁶ Breakdown and even simple busyness in the family contribute to this, as youth are more and more left to look after themselves.¹⁷ Clark argues that the very structures that are meant to serve young people only cut them off further from adult society. From the school system to specialised youth programmes, youth are predominately placed in contact with their peers rather than adults. As a result of this perception that the adult world has turned its back on them, youth feel forced to create their own world, which Clark calls 'the world underneath.' He describes this world as one in which youth are desperately seeking to belong, a world where they experience deep hurt from their sense of isolation. Their hurt can lead to varying levels of destructive and sexual behavior, depression, and self-harm.¹⁸ In an attempt to find belonging and survive their perceived abandonment, 'clusters' (small groups of friends) form intense bonds that can only be described as familial. While peer friendships (even 'cliques') have typically been a dominant part of adolescence, these clusters seem to serve a deeper

¹² Martin, *The Invisible Table*, ch. 2.

¹³ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 105.

¹⁴ Robert Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of the Youth Worker: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 27.

¹⁵ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Chicago: Baker Book House, 2005), 54.

¹⁶ Clark, *Hurt*, 44.

¹⁷ Clark, *Hurt*, 34, 51.

¹⁸ Clark, *Hurt*, 53-55, 122-135.

purpose of replacing the intimacy that has been lost in relationships with adults. A cluster will abide by agreed upon 'family rules,' such as what other clusters are to be associated with, what routes are to be taken when walking between classes on campus, what delinquent behavior is or is not allowed, etc.¹⁹ When living in the adult world in relationship with adults seems hopeless, youth create substitute relationships and what seems to be a rather dark, alternative world.

While Clark's research was in the North American context, his conclusions seem to resonate with what youth workers in New Zealand are observing. Merrillyn Withers observes that, 'Young people are...more broken than ever before...I have been aware for many years of a growing increase in emotional problems, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and low self-esteem...'²⁰ This brokenness is not limited to the unchurched; churching young people from Christian homes are not immune to the influence of 'the world underneath.'²¹ Clark observes that even youth who come from involved dual-parent families seem to absorb this culture of abandonment from their peers and the media.²²

After considering these commonalities of youth culture, the call continues to go out for caring Christian adults to identify themselves as missionaries to youth. While the need may seem bleak, the exciting news is that youth desire to have authentic relationships with adults who care for them.²³ In fact, it is through authentic relationship that the cultural gap between 'us' and 'them' can be bridged. The challenge in building such relationships is twofold. One, youth who feel the adult world has abandoned them are often slow to trust adults.²⁴ This means that bridging the cultural gap will take time. Two, youth are unlikely to be the ones to make the first move. Adult missionaries must take the initiative and persevere through any walls of distrust that are thrown in their path. The best missional example comes through the Incarnation of Christ, the Son of God, who came down to dwell with humanity. He entered this world rather than expecting people to somehow join him in his. As Christian adults partner in God's mission of reaching young people, they should adopt such an incarnational model of youth ministry.

¹⁹ Clark, *Hurt*, 69-86.

²⁰ Withers, 'Youth Ministry Today,' 258.

²¹ Withers, 'Youth Ministry Today,' 258.

²² Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), Kindle edition, location 2285-2298.

²³ Clark, *Hurt*, 54.

²⁴ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 105-106.

They cannot expect youth to come to them - they must go to youth, spending time on their turf, in their world. Whether it is in a school, on a sport field, or at the church youth programme, missional youth ministry requires Christian adults to humble themselves, become learners, and take the initiative in building relationships with young people.

B. The Gospel and New Life

As adult missionaries learn about young people and build authentic relationships with them, those relationships become bridges for the Gospel. It is important to note that relationships with youth should not hinge on what response those youth make to Jesus. As partners in the Mission of God, missionaries are called to love people unconditionally. A relationship with a young person is not a means to an end - it is the recognition of the intrinsic value of a person created in the image of God. However, as missionaries learn about youth, bridges should be discovered between youth culture and the Gospel. Relationships with youth are not authentic unless those relationships involve sharing the most important part of a Christian's life - his or her relationship with God. While talking about spiritual things most definitely should be happening in the context of church youth programmes, these conversations can and should happen over a cup of tea, at a rugby match, or while driving on the motorway. It is in offering the opportunity for youth to know God that youth work becomes youth ministry. The Church must offer the truth of Jesus Christ with as much wisdom and love as possible, even if it may seem counter-cultural. In a time when it is popular to be different, the difference between the Gospel and secular society may actually attract young people to the church.²⁵ Either way, the content of a missionary's message cannot be compromised. While the message does not change, the methods used to share it should change. Part of a missiological approach to youth ministry is presenting the Gospel in ways that resonate with the culture of young people.

When youth encounter the good news of Jesus Christ, Christian adults must be intentional about helping them understand the big picture of the Mission of God. It is one thing for a young person to

²⁵ Paloma Migone, 'Teens Tuning into God's New Beat,' <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/6706378/Teens-tuning-in-to-Gods-new-beat>

respond to an evangelistic message with a prayer asking for forgiveness of sins; it is another thing for that young person to encounter God through the redemption story and then surrender his or her personal story to him. One-off evangelistic moments without appropriate follow-up and discipleship are simply not good enough. In fact, as we minister in a more and more secular society, the worldview of young people often needs adjusting by the biblical history before they can sufficiently respond to the Gospel in the first place. As Michael Novelli proposes, it is when youth are given the opportunity to 'enter the Story' by learning the history of God's pursuit of his people - the history of the Mission of God - that they begin to understand God's intentions for their own lives.²⁶ For missionaries who are sharing the Gospel with youth, this means starting at the beginning. I will never forget the first time I asked a group of teenagers who had been attending my youth group, 'Who knows who Abraham was?' and no one could respond. I had to re-think my entire approach to youth ministry, going back to the crucial histories I learned as a child in Sunday School. Also, as previously noted, adolescence is a time of questioning. Church youth programmes and relationships with adult missionaries should be safe places for youth both to ask real questions about life and faith and to find real answers.

Given our understanding of adolescent cognitive development and how youth typically focus only on their immediate experience, it is helpful to provide opportunities for response to Christ that include long-term reminders. I have adopted and adapted God's practice in the Old Testament of instructing the Israelites to build memorials. The Israelites seemed easily to forget God's activity in their past, and in the same way, youth are prone to forget. Any student who spent much time in a youth ministry where I pastored could tell you all about memorials in the Old Testament, and many of them could probably go to their dresser drawer or bedside table and pick up some sort of physical memorial from their adolescent journey of faith. I have used everything from note cards to rocks, and towels to puzzle pieces as memorials of their encounters with and responses to God. God told the Israelites to make big piles of stones, so the value of the object is not really the issue. The value is in connecting the object with their experience with and decision for Jesus.

²⁶ Michael Novelli, *Shaped by the Story: Helping Students Encounter God in a New Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

After a young person has made a commitment to Jesus Christ and begun their walk with him (accomplishing the first two parts of the goal of youth ministry), the important role of the adult missionary continues through the journey of discipleship and transformation. The Wesleyan tradition emphasises the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual; the church can have high hopes for the work God will do in the individual lives of young people.

III. Releasing Youth

After youth have been reached with the gospel, a missionary to young people must consider what it means to release youth. A missional youth ministry should develop young disciples who are ‘(3) actively partnering in God’s mission and appropriately developing into maturity (4) within the context of an intimate, multi-generational church community.’

A. Mature Missional Lifestyle:

Youth ministry programmes and missionaries to youth in our local churches must release youth into a mature missional lifestyle. While these two characteristics are related, they will be considered individually. Part of the responsibility of a church community is to release young people into maturity. While this includes spiritual maturity, it also involves preparing youth holistically for adulthood. Rather than only catering to the present maturity level of students, the church is meant to challenge young people. Again, the church cannot replace parents in this role, but the Christian adult community is meant to supplement the family through aiding young people’s development into adulthood. Alvin Reid asked a seventeen year old girl what advice he should give to people who work with youth. She responded by saying, ‘Tell them we know how to be teenagers. We want them to show us how to be adults.’²⁷ What better place to find holistic modeling and mentoring for developing adults than in the church? Lloyd Martin explains that youth are looking for recognition from a community of the advances they are making into adulthood. It is when they do not receive this recognition from caring adults that they look for it elsewhere, such as through gang

²⁷ Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 29.

involvement.²⁸ Church leaders, then, should ask the question, ‘Is my church offering rites of passage for youth within our community?’ Some common approaches might be public recognition of college graduation or 21st birthdays, but I would encourage churches to consider additional rites of passage starting at puberty that are built into the life of the church community on a regular basis. Perhaps youth entering a certain class level in school are taken on a special trip, encouraged to attend a retreat, or given a spiritual gifts test and offered new opportunities to serve. If youth learn what it means to be an adult from their church rather than from the world, they will be much better prepared to take on the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood.

One of the aims in developing students toward spiritual maturity is ensuring that they internalise solid, Christian theology. In her book *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, Kenda Creasy Dean, a United Methodist minister and Professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrestles through some startling findings of a research study called the *National Study of Youth and Religion*. For this study, church youth in North America were interviewed between 2003 and 2005. Specifically, the study focused on what beliefs were held by youth who were committed to local church ministry programmes. The research showed that these ‘committed Christian youth’ were only ‘almost Christian,’ a reference to John Wesley’s sermon of the same name. Dean refers to the belief system of these young people as ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ After being faithful members of the North American church community, these youth had taken away a religious belief system that consisted merely of a set of morals and a ‘feel-good’ belief in a God who did not affect their daily lives in any way. Dean proposes that the beliefs of these young people actually reflect the practice of the churches they represent. While the churches in question would have orthodox theological statements, the lifestyle modeled by the adults in these churches would better align with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Dean writes:

Once, the church was known for lavish grace, reckless hospitality, utter devotion to Jesus Christ as God-with-us. Once, people viewed the church as being shackled to the *missio dei*, the extraordinary measures God took to woo us back into God’s arms through the Incarnation. Yet as

²⁸ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 46.

the NSYR dramatically demonstrates, today it is not only possible to think about the church apart from the mission of God, it is now *normative* to do so - even for young people who call themselves Christian.²⁹

Dean suggests that Christian parents and adults in church communities are not necessarily at fault for failing to teach orthodox Christian theology. Rather, she believes they are unintentionally showing unorthodox theology through their lack of missional passion and lifestyle. Instead of being shaped by official doctrinal statements, youth are being formed by modeling.³⁰ As young people observe adults who claim to believe orthodox Christian theology and yet do not live a missional lifestyle, these young people inductively form an unorthodox theology that they believe to be Christian.

The implications of this study go beyond its cultural context. First, the theology of young people is significantly impacted by their relationships with adults in the church community. After over fifteen years of youth work experience in New Zealand, Lloyd Martin wrote, 'Because the medium for your work with youth is the relationship that you build with them, you become the message. Your life will speak more powerfully...than anything that you might have to say.'³¹ Thus, if a local church wants to develop youth who are more than 'almost Christian,' that local church must be a missional church. Secondly, Withers writes that youth 'need a mission for which to sacrifice, a call to life-changing service, an opportunity to develop their gifts and abilities and a safe place to use them.'³² It is when youth are able to engage in this over-arching mission within a missional church that they will take hold of what it means to be fully Christian.

A missionary's task does not end with conversion and discipleship; a missionary's task is to participate in the process of full circle development, so that the person who was being reached becomes the person doing the reaching. Thus, in order for youth actively to partner in God's mission in the world, adult missionaries in the church must believe in the role of youth in God's mission and release them into that role. The often un-recognized, enormous potential of young people to participate in God's kingdom work on

²⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89.

³⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 89.

³¹ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 116.

³² Withers, 'Youth Ministry Today,' 272.

earth is evidenced in Scripture, modern history, and even current events.

Scripture is filled with examples of young people who were instrumental in God's work such as David, Daniel and his companions, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Timothy. Based on cultural-historical and contextual evidence in the Scriptures, an argument has been made that most of the disciples were likely teenagers when Christ called them to follow him.³³ In Ecclesiastes 12:1, the writer instructs, 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.' Paul advises in I Timothy 4:12, 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.' Clearly, the Scriptures affirm the role of youth in the Mission of God.

In *Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium*, Alvin Reid encourages today's churches to learn from history how invaluable youth are to carrying out God's mission in the world. He refers to seasons of revival and shows how crucial young people were to these times of spiritual awakening. For example, Reid examines the reflections of Jonathan Edwards on the First Great Awakening in North America; 'Edwards stressed that awakenings were not only inspired and led by young people, they particularly affected the younger generation.'³⁴ Closely connected with missional activity, the 'Haystack Prayer Meetings' were started and attended by students at Williams College in Massachusetts in 1804-1806. Out of those student prayer meetings, a mission to Asia was born which sent out missionaries such as Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson.³⁵ These are just a few examples from modern history that confirm the scriptural value of youth to the Mission of God.

Moreover, in recent times, individual young people have risen to the forefront in fulfilling God's mission. As an American junior high student, I was personally impacted by the missional lives and deaths of Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott, teenagers who were martyred by their peers in a high school shooting because of their faith in Jesus. More recently, teenage brothers Alex and Brett Harris wrote a book together called *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low*

³³ Ray Vander Laan, 'Follow the Rabbi: To Be a Talmid'

<http://followtherabbi.com/journey/israel/to-be-a-talmid/>

³⁴ Alvin Reid, *Raising the Bar: Ministry to Youth in the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 67.

³⁵ Reid, *Raising the Bar*, 69.

Expectations.³⁶ Their message, based on I Timothy 4:12, proclaims to young people that they do not have to live 'down to' the world's expectations of adolescents. Rather, they can live 'up to' God's expectations and lead the way in participating in the mission of the upside down kingdom. Their blog and book have sparked a spreading movement among Christian youth across the globe which has been labeled 'The Rebelution.'³⁷

The question, then, is whether or not local churches and missionaries to youth in those churches believe in the role of youth in the Mission of God. Youth can discern if adults view them cynically.³⁸ Lloyd Martin puts it bluntly, 'If you are unable to believe in a young person, you should not be in contact with them.'³⁹ Thus, Christian adults must examine their attitudes toward young people to ensure they are seeing the missional potential in them that God sees. If the church will, as Alvin Reid suggests, 'raise the bar' of its expectations for youth, then youth can be empowered for missional service and evangelism. This is done by inviting youth into the missional work of a church community through: organizing corporate service activities; evangelizing *with* them; offering them ministry training; helping them identify personal spiritual gifts and passions; providing appropriate ministry supervision; and most importantly, making space within the life of the church community for youth to serve in significant ways that correspond with their individual interests and strengths.

B. Church Community

Finally, the last piece of the goal of missional youth ministry is that it takes place (4) within the context of an intimate, multi-generational church community.' After examining what it means to release youth into a mature missional lifestyle, it should be obvious that this is only accomplished by releasing youth into the wider church community. Unfortunately, it is often tempting for youth ministry programmes to settle for instant results rather than long-term ones. Youth will more easily connect and belong in a youth programme where a limited number of adult leaders are involved. However, youth need to connect with multiple Christian adults in

³⁶ Alex Harris and Brett Harris, *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2008).

³⁷ 'The Rebelution,' <http://www.therebelution.com>

³⁸ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 145.

³⁹ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 125.

order to reach the other goals of missional youth ministry. In addition, it is no secret that the drop-out rate of young people from local church involvement after high school graduation is extremely high. I would argue that this is a result of young people not belonging to the wider church community during their time in youth ministry. Once youth outgrow the youth group, they no longer belong anywhere within the Body of Christ, and their faith journey may be in grave danger.

One might argue that youth pastors and youth leaders are members of the adult church community who are connected with youth - why is this not enough? I believe there are three reasons. First, youth leaders may exit the church community for a variety of reasons, leaving youth without any adult connections in the church. Second, one adult can only effectively serve as a model and mentor to a few youth in a community. Third, young people need relationships with several caring adults, not just one. Thus, youth pastors and youth leaders are meant to serve as bridges between youth and other adults.⁴⁰ This can be done through bringing a few youth along to church community events, encouraging their involvement in corporate worship experiences, and inviting adults who are not regularly involved in the youth ministry to visit youth events or even share personal testimonies in youth group.

Ultimately, however, releasing youth into the church community requires other adults to own the vision of Youth Ministry as Mission. Christian adults must answer the call to be cross-cultural missionaries to the youth in their community. Creating a culture of Youth Ministry as Mission in a church will probably not happen overnight. However, it can begin by identifying key adults in a local church who care for young people and inviting them into this missionary adventure, slowly creating a missional youth ministry culture in a church from the inside out. A simple 3 x 5 rule (or some variation of it) could be an easy place to start. The '3' stands for encouraging adults to connect with three youth on a weekly basis whether at a corporate worship gathering, at youth group, or even better, in an incarnational setting. The '5' means this only requires five minutes - a greeting, a handshake, a couple of questions about school and life. Of course, as time passes and youth begin to trust this adult who consistently shows care for them, the five minutes could turn into ten or twenty. It is when adults in the church

⁴⁰ Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 151-152.

community answer this call to missional youth ministry that youth pastors and youth leaders are empowered to minister effectively.

IV. New Zealand Case Study

A movement called 24/7 Youth Work is growing in New Zealand and clearly identifies the need for incarnational ministry among young people. While the goals of 24/7 Youth Work are not directly evangelistic, this movement intentionally places Christian adults into schools where they can build relationships with youth and help guide them through adolescence. This work depends on a solid relationship between the local school and the local church, marked by the trust that both entities are seeking to reach the same goals in the lives of students. 24/7 Youth Workers make a three to five year commitment to serve for ten paid hours plus ten volunteer hours per week in their local school. 24/7 Youth Work provides regular training and support for these workers while also depending on local church leadership to ensure that the workers are properly equipped.⁴¹ While most of these workers are professional youth workers or university students (since their schedules allow for such a commitment), the idea behind 24/7 can be and is implemented by other Kiwi Christian adults at a simpler level.

At one church, a bi-vocational solo pastor started attending his local college rugby matches to support a few students from his church. After being a faithful fan, the team started to recognise him. Now, he serves as a volunteer chaplain for the team (at the coach's request) and has been able to build relationships with most of the students on the team. Another church that is located next door to a school started a 'drop-in' programme one day a week after school dismissal. Students stop by the church for a snack and to play basketball or pool, use computers, and play video games. Volunteers of all ages from the church attend every week, building relationships with the students. In the past two months, this church has watched a mother and two of her children make commitments to Christ as a result of this programme. In every church and every community, the incarnational aspect of youth ministry will look differently. However, as the growing presence of 24/7 Youth Work affirms, schools and communities in New Zealand are very open to the involvement of caring adults in the lives of young people. As each church examines its own resources along with the possibilities and

⁴¹ '24/7 Youth Work,' <http://www.24-7youthwork.org.nz/>

needs in its community, ways of fostering relationships between Christian adults and young people in the community will surface.

Of course, church youth ministry programmes in New Zealand provide an opportunity for a certain level of incarnational youth ministry. In many ways, youth ministries can serve as the bridge between youth and adult culture. Many youth will attend a youth ministry at a church when they would be unlikely to attend a Sunday worship service. This is in large part because the cultural jump needed to attend a youth group is smaller than the cultural jump into an adult-oriented worship service. In the same way, Christian adults who might feel uncomfortable in a totally secular youth setting may have the courage to engage with students at a youth ministry. The key to this element of semi-incarnational ministry is balance. The youth ministry should maintain a strong enough presence of Christian adults to effectively build significant relationships with all the youth who attend, while at the same time ensuring that adults do not 'take over' the youth ministry programme in such a way that students no longer feel like the programme is designed for them.

In my observations of many youth ministries in New Zealand, I have noticed that ethnic-based Pacific Island churches and European-dominant churches could learn from each other in keeping this balance. Traditional Pacific Island youth ministries seem to have no trouble recruiting adults from the church to be involved. However, youth in some of these ministries feel stifled by too strong of an adult presence. Their 'youth ministry' can become very similar in appearance and structure to the adult ministries of the church. Rather than seeking to understand and engage youth culture, these programmes can reinforce the cultural divide. In European-dominant youth ministries, however, it seems that youth pastors struggle to keep adult volunteers involved and committed to the youth. The ratio of adults to students can become too low, and the unfortunate result is that students can attend on a regular basis without any significant relationships with adults or even sometimes without any adult knowing them by name. Some intercultural dialogue along these lines could prove extremely beneficial for youth ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In addition, in recent conversations with Kiwi youth workers and young adults in the church, I have gained one specific insight regarding the involvement of young people in the mission of the church. It seems that churches are quick to provide opportunities for young people to be involved in ministry and mission to other young

people or children, but it is more unusual for youth to be released to serve and lead outside of these contexts. For youth truly to be connected to the local church, they should be integral parts of the mission of the local church as a whole. This means allowing young people to speak into corporate worship gatherings and community projects rather than only giving them a voice into children and youth ministry programmes. It is when youth are entrusted with responsibility and authority outside of their own generational sphere of the church that they will begin truly to take ownership of both the local church and its mission as their own.

V. Conclusion

It is a privilege to partner in God's mission in the world through youth ministry by seeking 'to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God, actively partnering in God's mission and appropriately developing into maturity within the context of an intimate, multi-generational church community.' There are challenges that stand in the way of accomplishing this goal: an intimidating cultural gap, the distrust of youth who may have been hurt by the adult world, wrestling with culturally effective ways to share the truth and scope of the Gospel, learning appropriate expectations for youth as missional participants, helping prepare teenagers for adulthood, and challenging the ways local churches have or have not incorporated youth into their wider community. However, the challenges can be overcome when adult missionaries answer the call to engage with the culture of young people; persevere in pursuing relationships with youth; journey with students into the realm of adulthood and provide meaningful rites of passage throughout the process; share the Gospel by modeling; teach the biblical history of redemption in memorable ways; connect youth to the local church through missional involvement; and appropriately release young people into God's mission in the world.