

IMMERSE

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Knowing *How* to Include Parents

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In one of my previous churches, I received a call from a dad who wanted to come to our youth group gathering. He expressed to me that he couldn't get his son to go to the church-wide worship services with him because his son said they were "boring and not for teens." He said he would be going to "his" service (youth group) that same night. This father simply desired to be in worship with his son! I thought, *Great, a new volunteer!*

I then went on to explain to him that youth group was for students and that he would be welcome to serve as a volunteer; however, he really couldn't just "come with his son."

After I hung up the phone, I had a little internal debate. Here's the recap.

Question: Why couldn't he come?

Answer: Not background-checked yet.

Question: Why do I have youth group the same day as our corporate worship services?

Answer: That's when it met before I arrived, and the leadership told me changing that would be disastrous. It has *always* been that night.

Question: Why aren't our corporate worship services teen friendly?

Answer: Because we have to reach the adults, and that's not my job. Because we have youth group for teens, but is that church? Of course. Maybe. Not really. I don't know.

Question: Am I leading programs that separate students from their parents in their experience with God?

Answer: Yes. I don't know. Isn't that what youth ministry programs are supposed to look like?

I have continued this debate both in my mind and in my heart for years. I haven't completely reconciled it, and I think that's good. I've made some changes in my ministry approach, and I've moved to a more inclusive philosophy and practice on parents, teens, worship and discipleship.

When I began serving at Church of the Resurrection, the senior pastor and I had a long discussion about program development. Resurrection is a mega-church, and, like most mega-churches, we have separatist programs. Each member of a family goes to their particular affinity group or grade-level group (for students) at the same time. Each experiences a worship, teaching and/or community-building experience that is crafted for that particular group. This is great for reaching new believers and new families. It's fast, convenient and everybody's happy.

But I struggle with it. It plays to our consumerist sensibilities and reaches more people for Christ, but it creates a feeling of segregation in our church. We live out a level of this at my church, offering Sunday school programs at the same time as worship services, even though we encourage families to worship together. We began doing this as churches years ago. We taught them this paradigm.

So what, then? What can we do differently that might offer parents and students a shared experience with God, create a lifelong worship commitment and ultimately build discipleship that moves from the church into the home? I'm still seeking the answers, but here is where we have started.

We cut back our Sunday programming from two hours (which conflicted with worship services) to one hour. We are making major efforts to encourage families to worship together. We started a worship service that is teen oriented yet church wide, open to any and all. This service occurs on Sunday mornings, and many of our students play in the bands, usher, greet people, prepare the café, serve communion and more. Students are bringing their parents to worship, and that is inspiring! We see families worshipping together, and it has increased our volunteer interest in youth ministry exponentially.

We can't expect every change to be well received or even supported, but as servant leaders and shepherds in ministry, we are called to lead people through change. I wish I knew the magic solution to increasing communication and connection between parents and students in their faith journey. I am still searching. I do believe that through prayer, risk and bold leadership, we can discover new ways—and even old ways—to rely on the Holy Spirit's leading in the local church.