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The Future Is Together

By: Jeff Baxter

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Let's be honest. Times are changing in youth ministry. What worked to attract the crowd 10 years ago may not bear fruit today. Of course, there are some success stories from around the world, and many students are coming to Christ, being discipled into mature, Jesus-following adults, and they're staying connected to the local church. But overall, youth ministry is missing the mark in many ways. Negative culture seems to dominate the day. Adolescent development is stretching itself out to as long as 20 years. The family breakdown is crippling. The pressure is building on youth workers, as churches look to us to sort these things out for our students and their families.

The person sandwiched in the middle of this perfect storm is the average teenager. They are unintentionally alone.

You know this. I don't intend to paint an overly depressing view of local-church youth ministry today, but without an honest diagnosis of the state of affairs, we'll never really understand what our next steps should be. We don't need a new model in youth ministry. But what if we took on a new mindset?

Mindsets, those "*habitual or characteristic mental attitudes that determine how you will interpret and respond to situations*" (Thanks, Webster's!) direct our kneejerk responses to typical ministry situations. The default mindset for many youth ministries is summed up in the wonderful word: Separate. The youth worker has been given a *separate* room (or building), with a *separate* office, a *separate* budget, so they'll stay *separated* from the rest of the body of Christ to do *separate* programming, *separate* events, *separate* mission trips, *separate* worship teams, *separate* service teams and *separate* vision casting that is *separate* from the overall mission of their particular local church.

It's time to change this mindset. If ministry to the next generation is going to last, the days of separation in youth ministry need to end. Do teenagers need their time away

from adults, to learn and grow in environments that are tailored to them? Yes. However, we're using that mindset to create environments where students are fully separated all the time.

We make token connections, like the main worship service (where students sit together, separated from adults), intergenerational mission trips (that happen once a year) and inviting adult volunteers (who just talk to the other adult volunteers in the youth room). These are all great starting points, but they fall short of assimilating teenagers into the body of Christ.

Am I crazy? I don't think so. Maybe I feel this way because of the time I danced with my grandmother.

We were at my oldest sister's wedding. We still have the picture that was taken. In the photo, I look embarrassed (and happen to have a sucker in my mouth). I didn't know how to dance but was doing my best to look cool (and not fall down). Looking back on that experience, I see a beautiful picture of what one generation leading the next can look like.

The church needs to step into this picture. This is the future of faithful ministry to the next generation. We begin to dance in conversations and planning with senior leadership. We dance with parents, volunteers and church staff. We move outside the church walls to dance with school administrators, teachers, coaches and principals. The future of our youth ministry widens and deepens beyond keeping them quiet and away from the other adults to assimilating teenagers into the body of Christ while helping them grow into mature, Jesus-following adults.

We have, for years, been asking, *How can we have a dance for students?* I want to encourage us to ask different questions. We need to ask, *How can we all dance together?* and, *What kind of dancing can we all do together?* and, *How can we get more generations to gather together in this dance?*

From Separation to Collaboration

The dance begins with a smooth rhythm, where we encounter the simple mindset change from separation to collaboration. It begins with strategic and intentional conversations around many areas related to doing ministry together. How does collaboration begin?

First, we honestly assess the state of our own youth ministry. What is our context like? How does our church currently "do" youth ministry? This beginning invites everyone into the conversation. Parents, pastors (and pastors of other churches), leaders, students. Anyone who works with, loves or is deeply entrenched in the lives of students begins this collaborative process. We join it together.

Next, we need to have an honest conversation about the length of adolescent development with the pastors and parents in our church context. How is adolescence shaping our students? How is it affecting our student ministry? How are we addressing it? What are the implications for our context?

Third, we need to have conversations about the nature, structure and future of the biological family. Youth ministry is not just about individual teenagers anymore. It must include the whole family system as the primary disciplers. What do the families look like in your church? Are they healthy? Are we helping and encouraging parents to disciple their kids? Are we seeking collaborative ministry with parents? Are we coming alongside them?

Fourth, there must be more discussion around our current changing culture. What difference does negative culture have on your local church ministry to youth? How are we discussing these influences with parents, pastors and volunteers?

Fifth, we need to process topics like leadership, evangelism and discipleship through both our own contexts and through the conversations we've had about our contexts and our student populations. Future leadership needs to hold hands clenched and united with other co-laborers, seeking to disciple the student population within our contexts. Sharing the gospel needs to encompass the whole biblical text in context, not just a few separate

verses. Discipleship must include mentoring relationships that fulfill the “one another” commands with all generations together in the body of Christ. Parents need to be brought in. Leaders need to be identified and shaped. Students need to be sent and brought in. Co-laboring needs to be demonstrated by students.

And from all of this, we dance forward together. Each person taking on his or her own part, just like the body of Christ does. We do it, dancing together collaboratively, seeking to bring up the next generation for the glory of his kingdom.

I know. Changing our mindset is difficult. Changing our strategies is not easy. However, the youth ministry of the future will think more about how to connect generations, and it will focus less on individual ministry silos. Partnership will be the norm. May God give us the same passion as the psalmist, who wrote, “Even when I am old and gray do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come” (Psalm 71:18).