The State of Youth Ministry in the RCA

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The latest cover of *Group* magazine (January/February 2009), the world’s most read youth ministry resource boldly declares “The State of Youth Ministry: 639 youth leaders tell us what’s working and what’s not in their ministries.” That’s all I needed to see. As a father of three teens, a youth leader of thirty years, and a current consultant and leadership development coach, I was naturally drawn to the article. Like most who serve and care about youth, I want to know what 639 youth leaders think, feel, and believe about the current state of youth ministry. Specifically, I need to know what’s happening in the world of today’s teens and why so many churches are losing their connection with youth.

The results didn’t catch me by surprise, but rather confirmed my awareness of many of the shifts and changes occurring within youth culture and why we need a redefined approach to youth ministry. As I perused the article, I couldn’t help but compare the national findings to what I’ve discovered about youth ministry within the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

This article is my take on the findings. The data I want to compare with the national findings comes from two forms of research. These include statistics I have compiled from tracking the trends of professional youth leaders within the Great Lakes region of the RCA over the past ten years as well as specific assessment and consulting work I have completed with 80 churches. Given the geographical location of my research, the “state” of youth ministry referenced here is restricted primarily to that in the Midwest. And so while there is bound to be similarities between what I have discovered and what exists in our sister churches on the East and West coasts, my observations do not represent those churches. Additionally, my conclusions are exactly that—my conclusions. They may not necessarily represent the conclusions of other consultants or research analysts reviewing the same data; they may be more subjective than objective. At the same time, I truly believe these conclusions do reflect youth ministry reality within the RCA.

My hope is that this process will be helpful in distinguishing between youth ministry issues that exist across denominational lines and those that are specific to our reality in the RCA. My ultimate goal is not only to describe this reality, but to draw awareness to the unprecedented window of opportunity that is now opening itself to us. I am convinced that we need to act before this window closes. What follows then may be regarded as a call to action.
Disconnect between Teens and the Church

A key concern that most mainline denominations share, a concern that has been a point of research among such groups as Gallop, Barna, Search Institute, and others, is the disconnect between teens and the church. Adolescent teens are exiting our churches upon graduation and/or abandoning their faith at seemingly alarming rates. At the same time, there is inconsistency in the results. Although these groups have researched and tracked thousands of teens over several years, the results of their research seem to be all over the board and therefore inconclusive at best. Some results state that upwards of 94% of youth abandon and leave church life following graduation, while others suggest the figure is more in the 40-60% range. My limited research within the Great Lakes region suggests that somewhere in the neighborhood of 55-65% of youth may be leaving. But whether or not my findings or those of the major research groups are accurate is of little comfort to me. The upshot is that far too many youth are leaving with a negative perspective on the value of attending church. The result has had and will continue to have great and widespread impact. I would argue that this “exodus” has already made a long-term impact, as evidenced in the continued rate of decline among our mainline denominations. It is not the only factor accounting for the decline, to be sure, but it is one among several. And it is one we can do something about.

Another recent study tracked several hundred young adults over a ten-year time frame. The goal was to determine to what degree teens who were highly active in their youth group throughout high school remained active in their church (or another church) ten years later. These results, supported by information from Group’s “State of Youth Ministry,” indicate another reality worthy of addressing. Conclusive research yielded that only 20% of current 29 year-old adults who were highly active in youth group as teens are currently engaged in church life today. Although several cultural realities may have influenced these young adults’ attitude toward faith (e.g. faith can be separated from participation in a local church), the results of the research are an indictment of the limited depth of most ‘90s model youth ministries. The RCA has not been exempt from this trend. My conclusion: youth ministry has been and continues to be far too spiritually shallow to make a lasting impact on the lives of youth.

Within this reality, however, are pockets of church youth ministries that contradict the research findings. Without too much effort, one can discover in the RCA (and other mainline denominations) some impactful, spiritually-sustaining youth ministries, led by highly equipped and empowered adult leaders, who are coaching and mentoring emerging young adults in becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus (about 20-25% of our RCA churches). A Lily-funded study, “Exemplary Youth Ministry,” tracked several of these churches.
If it’s true that only a few vibrant and robust youth ministries exist within regions where most are struggling or failing, what further insight can we draw from Group’s “State of Youth Ministry” research, and how can the RCA learn from this research? Let’s consider a few comparisons that can contribute to the future development of youth ministry.

A Professionalized Youth Ministry

Group asked the question, “What are the chances you’ll still be in youth ministry five years from now?” 74% said they would probably or definitely still be in youth ministry. This result shows several changes in the way youth ministry is perceived. Kenda Dean, professor of youth ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary, provides insight into the professionalization of youth ministry. “In the 1980s, youth ministry was mostly a vocational accident. But some whom God called ‘accidentally’ developed the most robust, theologically sophisticated approaches that now set the standard for the vocation. Today’s youth ministers are more professional, more diverse, better prepared, better paid, and consistently more long-lasting than ever.” I couldn’t agree more. When I began my youth ministry vocation in the early ‘80s, there was just a handful of vocational youth pastors within RCA churches. Today, that reality has changed significantly. A poll of Great Lakes region RCA churches in 2003 showed that approximately 40% had paid, full-time or part-time individuals providing leadership for youth ministry. Five years later, the same poll revealed that 52% of Great Lakes churches had paid youth ministry professionals, and there is reason to believe that this trend will continue to increase. In 2003, a typical paid youth worker stayed at a church two years or less, which roughly corresponds with the national average of around 18 months. In 2008, the average youth worker in the Great Lakes region stays 3.4 years, with some closing in on 10 years or more. The role of the professional youth pastor has emerged as a valid ministry option, no longer seen as simply a stepping-stone to another ministry vocation. Several within current RCA churches see themselves as “lifers,” committed to a long-term career in youth ministry.

It’s my belief that RCA churches will continue to “hire” for youth ministry. Within the next decade, several more churches that have always relied on volunteers will move toward hiring paid professionals. Additionally, churches will find that their “pool” of potential candidates will grow, with a greater number having five or more years of leadership experience. Churches, however, must “hire” for the right reasons, not simply to “outsource” youth ministry or expect that “hiring” will be the answer to years of youth ministry failure. Additionally, we must not expect the professional youth pastor to “be all things to all kids;” rather, we must embrace our youth pastors as team facilitators or coaches, hired to equip and empower the church to engage in effective youth ministry. Further, we must explore and pilot new models of support and sustainability, providing infrastructures that support youth pastors through times of frustration and discouragement.
Youth Ministry in a State of Flux

“Youth Ministry is in a state of flux.” This statement by Christian Smith, the director of the National Study of Youth and Religion and Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame University, summarized what Group’s research further uncovered. Smith notes that “youth pastors don’t seem confident that standard methods are still the best, or in knowing which alternatives to explore. I sense uneasiness about the larger vision of the youth ministry project.” Mike Yaconelli, often referred to as the “father of modern day youth ministry,” prior to his untimely death in 2003, called youth ministry a “failed experiment.” Certainty Yaconelli, Smith, and others recognize the frustration that many youth pastors share in seeking to create spiritual systems that truly take our youth deep into discipleship. Kenda Dean offers similar insight. “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 play a key role, 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; (2) embrace emerging adults; (3) and meet the “unchristian” challenge.”

As in all mainline denominations, youth ministry in the RCA is also in a state of flux. Old paradigms have only produced limited results and new paradigms need exploring and piloting. Mark Oestreicher, president of Youth Specialties, notes that “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 are looking for.” In response, I believe we must recognize and own that most of our RCA churches fall on the side of struggling or unhealthy youth ministries. Many continue to spin their youth ministry wheels and fail to gain any traction. Several others have spiraled into a toxic state, with limited ability to support, sustain, and keep a youth pastor over the long term. Should we continue to engage in a “business as usual” youth ministry approach, we can expect the same result five, ten, and even fifty years from now (if we survive that long). The good news is that in my recent experience, especially in the last five years, several of our churches have become dissatisfied with “business as usual” and are not only willing to begin asking the tough questions, but also to embrace necessary change or seek the necessary help they need to articulate what change is needed. In an effort to assist those churches ready to embrace change and boldly pilot initiatives of change, the Great Lakes Regional Synod (along with other sister synods and support groups) are ready to journey with churches through this change.
Churches Must Cultivate Supportive Youth Ministry Climates

The most effectively trained youth pastor with all the leadership and relational gifts in the world will not survive in a church context that is toxic or unsupportive. Thirty-year youth ministry veteran, Doug Fields, believes that we have far too many hurting, lonely, tired, and under-appreciated youth workers. “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.”

A 20-25% success rate should be deemed unacceptable. Although results vary among denominations, we should not settle for anything less than 75%, a goal the Great Lakes region has set for cultivating healthy and reproducing churches. Such a goal will not be achieved overnight, but will require a long-term committed effort. If your church is struggling to build a strong and sustained youth ministry, consider the following recommendations:

• Only call lead pastors who are willing to serve as the primary advocate for children and youth ministry. Nearly 50% of all youth pastors who resign or are fired note tension with the lead pastor. Sometimes this is the fault of the youth pastor; sometimes the result of being ignored or hung out to dry by the lead pastor.
• Set aside financial resources for the ongoing training of your vocational youth pastor, and for training a competent volunteer team. My recommendation would be 20% of your youth ministry budget.
• Establish a culture that encourages rest and renewal for your youth pastor. Spiritual accountability and boundaries are critical to sustainable youth leadership.
• Protect your volunteer team from burning out. Volunteer youth leaders should not be expected to serve in multiple ministry roles throughout the church.
• Seek out a consultant or youth ministry development agency to assist with articulating your mission and vision for youth ministry, and establishing realistic expectations for development. Less than 20% of our churches have a defined youth ministry mission, vision, and long term plan.
• Budget appropriately and proactively. Youth ministry consultant Mark DeVries in his recent book, Sustainable Youth Ministry, notes a common reality among churches that have strong and vibrant youth ministries.8 These churches invest $1000-$1500 for each teen they expect to reach, serve, and train as a disciple of Christ. This figure would include the salary and benefits for your paid leadership.
• Create a culture that invites youth into service and leadership roles. Create space for youth to discover and test their spiritual gifts. Assimilation versus isolation is one of our keys toward healthy youth ministry.
• Pay attention to what your building facility communicates about and to youth. In other words, does your facility demonstrate and communicate that your church values youth and youth ministry?

In 2006 I met with a group of young adults who had recently graduated from high school, but were still deeply engaged in the life and ministry of their church. When I asked why they were excited about their church when so many of their peers were exiting through the back door, two common themes emerged. First, nearly all said that their church provided opportunities to participate in caring and compassionate communities (small groups) where they could be real, ask tough life questions, and disagree in love. In other words, they found real and authentic community. Second, most noted that their church community proactively communicated and demonstrated that they valued youth. Youth were seen and made to feel a valuable part of the greater church community. For any church struggling with developing youth ministry momentum, asking “how do we communicate and demonstrate that we value our youth” is a great place to begin.

Reshaping Youth Ministry

*Group* asked respondents what one good change they saw in the last five years. The breadth of answers to this question was astonishing, perhaps reflecting the number of positive trends that are beginning to emerge. With regard to RCA churches, we are seeing many of the same. Here are a few:

• There is an attention to family ministry—entrusting teens’ spiritual development with their parents. Youth ministry is seen as a support to parents.
• There is hunger among youth for “deeper things” and a move away from “flash” toward “substance.”
• There is a transition from a preaching style of youth ministry to a more interactive and relational style.
• Area youth ministries are working together for the sake of the kingdom—not just for themselves.
• Youth-engaging missions as well as quality mission opportunities are emerging.
• Social justice is a primary focus.
• Different styles of worship that appeal to youth are emerging—and a willingness to allow or embrace some of these styles within mainstream worship instead of isolating youth to their own wing of the church where no one will hear them.
• There is an emphasis on youth leadership development and openness among church leadership to engage youth in worship and other roles.
• A plan that recruits, trains, and empowers adult leaders to serve out of their
giftedness is developing.
• There is movement toward mentoring and connecting every student with an
adult mentor or spiritual coach.
• A number of available resources for youth ministry are becoming available.
• There is increasing recognition that a healthy youth ministry will contribute to
the revitalization of a faith community.

Among the 20-25% of RCA churches that demonstrate vibrant and sustained youth
ministry, nearly all of these trends noted above are evident. Additionally, most of these
churches have a youth ministry leadership team that has been serving together for five
years or more.

An Opportunity Waiting to Be Seized

Group’s study points me to one definite conclusion: we have an opportunity to rewrite
the book on youth ministry, to determine to what degree youth ministry will become a
priority within our churches. Youth ministry is in flux, both in the RCA and other
mainline denominations. This is a good thing, because the last several decades have
demonstrated less than stellar results. We can no longer be satisfied with a “business as
usual” half-hearted attempt at youth ministry. We can no longer isolate or ignore our
youth. We must recognize and embrace them, not just as the church of tomorrow (they
won’t be here tomorrow if we don’t embrace them today), but as the church of now. We
must create and pilot new infrastructures that foster positive climates for change,
environments that communicate and demonstrate that youth are valued, that make
space for the engagement of their gifts. We must give our youth ministry teams room to
explore and to test new teaching models that take youth deep into serious journey with
Jesus. We must re-evaluate our budgeting process, recognizing that our budget reflects
our values. We must defuse the spirit of competition between churches and come
together in community-wide youth ministry efforts. We must re-embrace and discover
new ways to support and engage parents as the primary spiritual guides in the lives of
youth. And we must cultivate a church culture that fosters a congregational-wide
engagement of our covenant theology in which every member has something to
contribute to the development of youth ministry and the spiritual nurture of every
youth. Continued movement in these directions will ultimately move us toward healthy
youth ministry development.

The current state of youth ministry is chaotic, complicated, confusing, and even clumsy
at times, but in our quest to answer the cry of our youth and to truly embrace a call to
action, by God’s grace we will see youth ministry become a vital part of true Christ-like
communities that cultivate revitalization and renewal, not just in our youth, but in our
churches, and in our world!
This study, once further unpacked and interpreted within various youth ministry contexts, will serve as a future guide, providing insight into how we can sustain healthy youth ministry over the long haul. For more information, see exemplarym.org.

2 Kenda Creasy Dean, “Expand the Umbrella,” Group, January/February 2009, 60.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Kenda Creasy Dean, “Expand the Umbrella,” 60.
7 Mark Oestreicher, “From Autonomy to Affinity And Beyond,” Group, January/February 2009, 64.
8 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).