



JDFM Forum: An Interview with Mark DeVries About *Family-Based Youth Ministry, Twenty Years Later*.



Mark is a 36-year veteran of youth ministry, having served for the last 28 years as the Associate Pastor for Youth and

Their Families at First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the author or co-author of a number of books, including *Family-Based Youth Ministry* and *Sustainable Youth Ministry*. Mark is the founder or co-founder of a number of ministry enterprises, including Ministry Architects, the Center for Youth Ministry Training, Justice Industries, and Ministry Incubators. Mark has three grown children and lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

1. WHY DID YOU WRITE *FAMILY-BASED YOUTH MINISTRY*? TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS BY WHICH THIS BOOK CAME INTO EXISTENCE.

So many youth workers, including myself, were heartbroken over the disconnect between kids who participated in youth group and those who continued to live out their faith for a lifetime. It set me on a search to discover the key factors that lead to lifelong discipleship. I met for a few days with my dear friend and seminary classmate, Larry Coulter, one of the most creative pastors I know, to sketch out the outline of a book. During that week, we met with a young man named Walt Mueller who was in the early stages of a ministry he was calling “Headfirst,” which after being confused for a birthing center, changed its name to the Center for Youth Ministry Training. What was clear in many, many conversations and studies is that parents played an unparalleled role in the faith formation of

teenagers. Like most first time authors, I got my fair share of rejection letters, until a friend who had published with InterVarsity Press made an introduction for me.

2. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE PRIMARY CHANGES YOU'VE OBSERVED IN YOUTH MINISTRY SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF FAMILY-BASED YOUTH MINISTRY?

I am delighted to see the ways that youth ministry has grown up. Though still true in some places, fewer and fewer churches are looking for the relational savant to lead their ministries. Popularity with kids is important, but I'm grateful that more and more churches are realizing that they can't build a ministry on "hip." I've been delighted to see the growing anchoredness of youth pastors who seek out deliberate spiritual direction, who read more than the latest Christian fad book, who are actually integrating research, theology, and discernment.

At the same time, as the noise of marketing has become louder and louder and the options for teachers have multiplied dramatically, it has been easy for families to jettison regular involvement in the life of the church. This has led youth pastors to spend more and more time "marketing" their ministries through texting, email, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest. We've now got incredible resources, but the sheer volume can be over-

whelming to the normal youth pastor.

When I first started out, there were a handful of churches doing mission trips. But over the last decade or so, the "mission-trip industrial complex" has become a multi-million dollar business, raising the obvious question of whether the overwhelming cost of "spiritual tourism" and "service learning" is worth the investment. I am gladdened to see a deeper conversation around these issues, even though I feel certain it will effect the way we do ministry and missions in my church 10 years from now.

3. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE PRIMARY CAUSES OF THE SURGE OF INTEREST IN FAMILY MINISTRY OVER THE PAST DECADE?

The National Study of Youth and Religion along with the Sticky Faith project have both made the unequivocal (re-)discovery that no one influences the faith of adolescents like their family—for better or for worse. Add to this cocktail the fact that many, many churches are seeing their own extinction on the horizon, and they want to do whatever they can to recalibrate their ministries not only to lead young people to stay in their church but to lead them to lifelong discipleship. Since David Kinnaman's book *UnChristian* came out, we have been more and more aware that this generation of young adults is not, by

and large, coming back to church as they move into young adulthood as previous generations have.

With the rampant and growing isolation of youth into their own generational ghetto, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* has stood as a guardrail for churches who feel compelled to simply go along with the culture and isolate and abandon youth within the church in the same way the culture done. One other factor—whenever we see leaders on all sides of the theological spectrum saying the same thing—from Richard Ross at Southwestern Seminary to Kenda Dean at Princeton to Kara Powell and Chap Clark at Fuller, as well as Doug Fields and Mark Yaconelli—it may just be a sign that the Spirit is at work, moving in a wave that is larger than a single ideology.

4. IF YOU WERE TO WRITE FAMILY-BASED YOUTH MINISTRY TODAY, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY DIFFERENTLY?

The one corrective I would like to bring to most teachers of family-based youth ministry is this: The modern nuclear family, as we know it and often teach it, is a far cry from the biblical family. The biblical family, though not monolithic, was much more of an extended family, with lots of adults pouring into young people, rather than mom and dad feeling the total weight of responsibility (think Jesus'

parents' journey away from Jerusalem and not even noticing that their 12 year old was missing for an entire day).

If our goal is to create mature Christian adolescents, then maybe we should focus only on moms and dads. But our goal is not adolescent disciples. It is adult disciples. And adult disciples are shaped, as they move into adulthood, not simply by their parents' faith. When I asked groups of adults, "How many of you had at least one person in your life, outside your mom and dad, who had as much or more influence on your faith than your parents did?," always more than half the room raises their hands. An exclusive focus on the faith maturity of "teenagers" during their teenage years can be short sighted.

5. WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN YOUTH MINISTRY?

I'm beginning to believe that we are getting better and better at training youth pastors for positions that will, by and large, not exist in 20 or 30 years. The full-time youth pastor (and perhaps even the full-time pastor) may go the way of the dinosaur as the "death tsunami" of those who have historically given so generously to the church die off. I'm concerned that we are now training people for a way of doing ministry that may not be possible. I think it's possible that we can do things in the next 20 or

30 years to be prepared for this shift, but I'm afraid that most churches will be totally surprised and paralyzed in a few decades when these changes happen. (By the way, I'd be happy to be wrong about this. If I am, and we're ready for it, all the better. But if I'm right, it's time to start re-imagining the economics of ministry while we've still got time).

6. WHAT WOULD BE YOUR COUNSEL TO A YOUNG PERSON TODAY WHO SENSES A CALL TO YOUTH MINISTRY?

I would praise God to hear of one more kindred spirit in this work. I would remind him or her that Mike Yaconelli was right, that youth ministry is a "suffer-calling." Don't get into it if you don't want your heart broken. I would also plead with them, "above all else," to invest in and guard their own hearts by finding coaches and counselors who can keep them growing. Sadly most people in ministry, not just pastors, haven't learned much of anything in the past decade. They may read a book or two each year but nothing changes in them or their ministries. And change seldom happens unless we increase our capacity—not just our skill, but more importantly, our capacity to love, to persevere, to cling to the strength that is only found in the joy of the Lord.

On a practical level, I would encourage them to start a little side busi-

ness that can eventually support their ministries. My prediction is that if a normal youth pastor spent 5 deliberate hours building a little side business, in ten years, that business would be able to fund his ministry if (and when) the church runs out of money.

7. WHAT BRINGS YOU THE MOST JOY AS YOU LOOK AT THE IMPACT OF FAMILY-BASED YOUTH MINISTRY OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS?

It brings me great delight that the Spirit has used the principles of Family-Based Youth Ministry in all kinds of churches, all kinds of schools, all kinds of families. Though I am a Presbyterian pastor, these principles have rung true among the Mennonites and the Roman Catholics, among the United Methodists and the Southern Baptists, and just about everything in between.

That God would use a goober like me to point to what our God seems to be doing on the horizon is evidence that God's sense of humor and delight in using his children to do things they cannot do.

But my great delight continues to be having the chance to see young people from our ministry step alongside, no longer as recipients of ministry but as partners in the gospel with those who have been their great cloud of witnesses for so many years.