



**AUCKLAND PARTNERSHIP  
OF ASSEMBLIES**

# APA SEMINARS



**KEEPING THEM:  
RETAINING ADOLESCENTS  
AND YOUNG ADULTS IN  
THE CHURCH**

# KEEPING THEM



## ➤ Acknowledgements:

- David Goodwin, *Lost in Transition*
- Nigel Cottle, *Young Adult Research*

## ➤ The Questions

- Why are so many young people discarding church?
- When does the shift to leave church commence?
- What we can do to retain young adults?

# Why do young adults leave church?



- Is it that they are just rebels?
- Is it that the Christian faith is unattractive?
- Is it that they cannot believe, given the ideas of science, evolution and technology?
- Is it that they have not been taught well enough about the Bible and Christian beliefs?
- Is it that today's secular, materialistic society has made faith appear irrelevant?
- **What is it, in your opinion, that causes young adults to leave?**

# Examine the years of childhood and early adolescence



- David Goodwin surveyed 212 adult active church members in NSW
- Most (83.9%) were 25-65
- In gender 72.3% were female and 27.3% were male
- Most (85.7%) NOT in paid church ministry (20+ hours)
- All had been to Sunday School or the equivalent children's ministry
- Here are his findings:

# What about church and children?



- As children, 82% had had a positive experience of Children's Ministry
- But only a small percentage of their peers had continued through adolescence and into adult church life.
- The drop-out rate was up to 100% of peers.
- What were their memories?

# Their memories



- “I was looking for God and never quite found him in Children’s Ministry. I just found enough to keep me hanging around for a while, long after most of my peers had quit.”
- “I was called a rebel because we were forced to sit through sermons, and listening was considered more important than understanding what the preacher was saying.”
- “I remember very little of what happened through those years apart from collecting stickers and pasting them into a book.”

# When did children and youth drop out?



- 18% - at the end of the children's programs
- 39% - half way through high school
- 32% - at the end of high school
- 11% - when they were adults



# Why did young people stop coming to church?



- Peer pressure (84%) – this ranked the highest, #1, as the ‘deal-breaker’
- Loss of faith or belief (76%)
- Lack of acceptance by the church (59%) – including “no friends” at church
- Inadequate youth group (53%) lowest ‘deal-breaker’ at 5% cf 26% for #1

# Comments of/by the drop-outs



- As soon as parents stopped making them come to church their children stopped coming.
- When friends left church there was nothing to keep them coming.
- If there was no personal relationship with God there was no reason for them to come.
- “The church seemed to be interested in me only when they had a position to fill.”
- Church leaders are often not aware of young people who are not regular attenders.
- “Adolescence is a tough time and young people need someone to walk alongside them.”

# How well were young adolescents equipped for life in high school and beyond?



- Were they prepared for the hard questions, like, “Is God real?”
- Were they equipped to stand up to peer pressure?
- Were they resourced to see and prepared for the temptations they would encounter during adolescence and beyond?
- Had they learned to believe in and to trust God in the conflicts and challenges of adolescence?
- While most acknowledged some help, usually 90+% could not say they were “extremely well” prepared.

# An Old Testament Principle



- “Keeping Them” in the Old Testament included their participation in the religious festivals and worship.
- “To take their part as a learner was the child’s own inalienable share in the worship of the community. It was a rehearsal for the day when they would participate as adults.”

# Connecting through participation



- It is suggested that all elements of children's ministry should be working toward the day when a child graduates into sixty or seventy years of adult worship, and that this will happen only if they are encouraged to minister, participate, and be involved in meaningful worship with the adult congregation.
- There is a 'culture shock' when they leave children's ministry and enter adult church – enough to make them to stop wanting to attend church altogether.

# How we nurture faith development



- Ritual (or faith practices), story, and relationships are essential in children's formation of faith, for these are what will introduce and connect them to the values of the faith community. Children need to see, participate in, and be able to relate to baptisms, to dedications, to worship, to communion, to Scripture reading and to adult Christians of the congregation.

# How we nurture faith development [contd]



- Stories from people other than their immediate family provide for them “models for their own faith development”. Experiences such as these are crucial for children if their identity in Christ is to be formed.
- (Beckwith; Search Institute, Mn; Stonehouse & May)

# The importance of connection



- A US report argues that the weakening of social institutions that foster connectedness for children is a major cause of the current mental and behavioural health crisis among US children. [Large and growing numbers of U.S. children and young people are suffering from depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental and behavioural problems. Why? What can be done to reverse this trend?]



# The importance of connection [contd]



- Using scientific evidence they show that the child is “hardwired to connect” for moral reasoning and openness to the transcendent which is essential to health and human flourishing. The report introduces the idea of “**authoritative communities**” defined as groups that live out the types of connectedness that children increasingly lack. These are groups of people who are committed to one another over time, to model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person.

# Is the way we teach important?



- The form of teaching which simply involves “accumulation and memorising of facts where questioning, challenging, and thinking laterally are generally not encouraged” is not effective with today’s young people.

(McQueen 2008)

# Does the Bible speak to kids?



- Churches need to think about creating ways for children to enter the biblical narrative, engage with the story, and listen to the Spirit of God. This will then allow the meaningful parts of the story to speak to them in real and formative ways.

(Beckwith 2010)

# Where does home and church meet?



- What if churches decided to leverage their influence with families and rally them around a synchronised plan to influence a generation's faith? ...if they started programming as if they believed parents play a critical role in the moral and spiritual development of children?...Perhaps the reason many families ignore the church is that they honestly do not think the church has their best interests at heart.

(Joiner 2009)

# Adolescents are different!



- As children become teenagers “they begin redefining themselves through the eyes of other people who are not in their immediate family. The older they get, the more important it is to have other (adult) voices in their lives saying the same things but in a different way.”

(Joiner, 2009)

# How “real” are adult Christians?



- Young people are “often overlooked by the church as they wrestle inwardly to make sense out of the scriptural truths they have been taught.”
- In part this is because “personal struggles are seldom mentioned from the pulpit, and therefore sensitive, struggling Christians are left holding the bag with feelings they do not understand and feel are wrong in light of the scripture they have been taught to believe and follow.”

(Sloat 2000)

# How do we respond to the “rebel”?



- Rebelliousness is part of growing up and is often needed in order to reach maturity. The church community may try to protect but instead can set up a system to extend adolescence; unfortunately this can result in a stage described as “premature renunciation”.

# Give answers or discover them?



- There is a shift in how contemporary kids come to the conclusion that something is true. The more we pound away with all the answers, the more inclined they are to doubt those answers and to go looking for the truth themselves.

(Kimmel 2004)



# Key factors in Young Adult ministry



- Nigel Cottle, youth pastor and consultant
- Three crucial factors:
  1. Recognise the generational gap (rebellion)
  2. Recognise that we are in a world-view shift (rise in knowledge, globalisation, tech.)
  3. Recognise this shift in the way church is organised (“adolescence” and “youth ministry” are recent phenomena; our response is to cater for this and to professionalise – too much?)

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #1 INTEGRATION

- **Young adults don't stay where they don't belong**
- There's a time when they are too old for the youth group and they no longer belong anywhere
- Belonging and integration is **the foundation** for all that follows to nurture and disciple and retain young adult followers of Jesus

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #1 INTEGRATION [contd]

- **Integration** is more than connecting – it's more than a jigsaw connecting, or lines connecting to a centre hub
- Integration is where if one part falls out, the rest ceases to function as it should
- Integrate young adults by intentionally building relationships

# Keeping Young Adults



- **Suggestion #1 INTEGRATION [contd]**
- Interact with another adult over coffee to share lives and faith
- Interact by consulting with them about church and the way they feel about it
- Interact through involving them in planning aspects of church life
- Interact in common-interest groups, like: fishing, cooking, gardening, prayer, meals, celebration events

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #1 INTEGRATION [contd]

- Develop occasional involvement tasks, like: church working bees, community outreach, school assistance, fund-raising events, short-term mission trips, etc
- Develop the reality of being in the church family together as a place to be, with opportunity to hang out and identify with others
- Develop an ethos of give-and-take

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #2 MENTORING

- High value in this but low capacity to do this well – because often there’s no relationship and low chemistry. So look for relationships that arise from casual involvement activities and any chemistry emerging from this.
- How well do the older generation appeal to young adults? Are they disillusioned or phoney or are they able to inspire? Identify those older adults of whom young people can say, “I want to be like them.”

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #3 DISCIPLESHIP

- This is more than curriculum, more than teaching on a Sunday morning, although it includes these elements.
- It provides a platform from which questions can be asked safely. There's often not yet depth in young adults and the experience of older adults is valuable. It provides a foundation to deal with the hard issues can be

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #3 DISCIPLESHIP [contd]

- There's a theological shift with an emphasis on what you have been saved for, rather than what you have been saved from. More: "What does Jesus want me to do?" Not just, "It's great that I've been saved from hell."
- The theological shift also occurs as they read the Bible, and particularly the OT, for themselves. Their youth group teacher has been a young 19 year old who has little depth. Now they find themselves bewildered by a God who kills and slaughters. They don't understand. They are uncertain. Faith is lost. They leave.



# Keeping Young Adults



## **Suggestion #4 MISSION INVOLVEMENT**

- This provides a common cause (home or overseas)
- Many young adults provide the leadership in youth groups, but that does not last more than a few years. It's rare to last for ten years!
- Increased leadership ratios in youth programs could make a huge difference in mentoring and also challenge and establish both parties. Allow two kids to one mentor and give time to grow and develop the relationship.

# Keeping Young Adults



## Suggestion #4 MISSION INVOLVEMENT [contd]

- Mission gives an answer to: What difference do we make in the world? If the church closed its doors what difference would it make in the world?
- The second-largest group of people leaving the church are the “empty nesters”. With the kids gone, the question is: “If I left church what difference would that make? Who would notice?”
- Keeping young adults involves the participation and care of older adults