

Separating the Generations and Traditional Youth Ministry

Dr. Chuck Stecker

While we call the church a family, in reality our ministries are stratified by age groups or special needs. And the special needs often relate to a portion of an age group—for example, special needs within the sector of the seniors, Baby Boomers, or Baby Busters. Typically all the generations of the church are brought together for one worship service throughout the week, and even on that occasion, in many churches the children and teens are removed for a separate worship service away from their parents.

Mark DeVries, Associate Pastor for Youth and Families at First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, identifies the problem well. Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit with Mark, and he gave me a copy of a book he wrote in 1994 entitled *Family Based Youth Ministries*. It has since been revised and is well worth the time to read. In the first chapter he stated, “**What I am calling ‘traditional youth ministry’ has little to do with style or programming or personality. It has to do with the place of teenagers in the community of faith. Over the last century, churches and para-church youth ministries alike have increasingly (and often unwittingly) held to a single strategy that has become the most common characteristic of this model: the isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents.**”¹

When it’s announced that the church family is going to watch a movie, it normally means that those identified as adults are going to watch a movie in the sanctuary; the youth will watch that movie or a different one in their facility, and the children will watch a children’s movie in their part of the building.

Often we think that because we’re heading to the same place together, we’re really involved in each other’s lives. Most church functions would resemble a reunion rather than a true family gathering. Larry Kreider, founder of Dove Christian Fellowship International, stated it this way:

There is a huge difference between vibrant family life and an extended family getting together for a reunion. When family comes together for a *reunion*, they present their best side to the larger family.... Real family knows the struggles because they are there day after day.... Real family knows each other inside out.

They see the good, the bad, and the ugly, and they still love each other and work as a unit to encourage each member. We can be ourselves in a family. There is no test to pass; we are included simply because we are *family*.²

We must look at our churches and ask a simple question..... Are we doing more to separate our children and teens from their parents than we are doing to help them grow stronger together? A true “intergenerational” environment does not mean all generations are simply in the same building at the same time. It means that we are intentionally bringing people together for the purpose of developing intergenerational relationships.

¹ Mark DeVries, *Family Based Youth Ministries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 21.

² Larry Krieder, *The Cry for Spiritual Fathers & Mothers* (Ephrata, PA: House to House Publications, 2000), 19–20.

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