Foreword
Family Ministry and the Future of the Church

Over the last two years I have become aware that there is a genuine family ministry movement happening in the evangelical community, a movement involving churches of all sizes and denominations. At nearly every youth or children's conference, there are seminars dedicated to the subject of family ministry featuring multiple speakers presenting their perspectives on how it ought to be done. What is causing this groundswell of interest in family ministry? And why is this movement so significant?

First, family ministry is necessary and significant because families are under siege. They have been under siege since the beginning of time. When God declared in the third chapter of Genesis that the serpent would bruise the heel of the woman's offspring but that her offspring would crush the serpent's head, God invoked a declaration of war. From that point to this one, it has been the enemy's hellish strategy to undermine families. There is a bull's-eye on the back of every home, and the church must reorient itself to protect and to develop families.

Second, family ministry is necessary and significant because husbands and fathers have been marginalized. If Satan's strategy has been to undermine the home generally, his more specific strategy has been to marginalize husbands and fathers. In the garden of Eden, the serpent came to tempt the woman (Gen 3:1), undermining God's design for her husband to guide and to protect her. Yet, in the aftermath of the fall, God came looking for

Adam (3:9). Why? Because Adam was responsible for that family unit. He was responsible to guard his home. The contemporary church has made it too easy for husbands and fathers to follow Adam's example of neglecting their responsibilities at home. Dad is working too much, pursuing his own personal pleasures instead of sacrificially providing spiritual leadership for his family. Contrast this too-familiar pattern to God's ideal, expressed through the pen of the prophet Malachi: "He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Mal 4:6). Any church failing to reach men and turn their hearts toward their families will be perpetually weak. A church that wants to pursue God's best must reorient itself to reach husbands and fathers and to hold them accountable for the most important job they will ever have.

Third, family ministry is necessary and significant because what we have been doing is ineffective. Today's churches offer more youth camps, conferences, Christian music, sophisticated technology, books, and trained leaders than ever before. Yet, for whatever reason, a significant number of children fail to make the transition from youth ministry to mature, Christian adulthood. The sort of ministry that will address this problem can't be found by adding one more church program found on the shelf of a Christian bookstore. Seminary classes cannot solve this problem. Not even this book can solve the problem. What is needed is a theological and structural reorientation spawning church cultures that draw families together instead of pulling them apart.

Fourth, family ministry is necessary and significant because the church is a family. I long to see a new climate sweep through our churches—a climate where families are drawn together, where dads are equipped to lead, where parents embrace the primary responsibility of discipling their children, where children's hearts are turned toward their mothers and fathers, where the hearts of mothers and fathers are turned toward their children, where the people of God make a place for single moms and shattered families and teenagers who come without parents. All of this is significant because, according to Scripture, the church is a family. Every believer in Jesus Christ has "received the Spirit

of adoption" (Rom 8:15). God is the heavenly Father (Matt 6:9) who disciplines us like children (Heb 12:5–11). The church is the family of God, and family relationships represent a divinely ordained paradigm for God's church, which is why it is so important for our relationships in the family and in the church to reflect God's ideal. When congregations fail to conform to God's Word in every area, it becomes easy to let husbands and fathers off the hook, to embrace ministry models that do not hold parents accountable for the discipleship of their children, or to allow the church's many programs to fragment families instead of unifying them. When this happens, it is usually because the church has leaned too heavily on human pragmatism as opposed to a robust dependence on the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. It may be painful to realign the church's proclamation and practices. It may be hard work, and it may require repentance. But it is never wrong.

Fifth, family ministry is necessary and significant because families are waiting to be led. Right now in churches all over the country, families see the problems, and they are waiting for solutions. They are waiting to be led. Are you prepared to guide them? If you're ready to take the lead in these transitions, this book will serve as an invaluable resource to equip you with the knowledge you will need to guide families in your church toward a better way.

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Why Every Church Needs Family Ministry

by Timothy Paul Jones

Confessions of a Well-Meaning Youth Minister

"This is Wednesday night *youth group*. We don't *do* Bibles here."

After six years as a pastor, perhaps my life had grown too predictable. For reasons that weren't readily apparent at the time, God had moved me from the pastorate to youth ministry. It wasn't quite the move I anticipated as I completed degrees in ministry and biblical studies. Yet it was, without any doubt, God's direction. And I was confident that I would do well. I had, after all, been trained in the latest methods of Christian education and youth ministry during the studies that led to my master of divinity degree. So I began the process of searching for a student ministry position.

A few months later a mid-sized congregation near Tulsa, Oklahoma, called me as their youth minister. I moved from proclaiming the Scriptures from the pulpit each Sunday morning to routing hormonally charged couples out of closets during lock-ins, coming up with mathematical formulas for how many middle-schoolers it takes to consume a medium-sized pizza, and explaining to the maintenance committee how the moshing that resulted in a six-foot hole in the sheetrock really was congruent with the church's overall ministry strategy.

It was a promising position. The youth had their own activities, separate from the rest of the congregation, and the church

budget provided funds to support these activities. The church was in the process of building an exclusive domain for the youth in an upper floor of the family life center so that neither youth nor adults disturbed one another. What's more, my predecessor in this position had attracted sixty or more students each Wednesday evening, and more than one hundred students each year for church camp. Attendance on Wednesday nights had dropped into the twenties after the previous minister's departure, but everyone in the congregation seemed certain that, as soon as they called a new youth minister, the numbers would race back to their previous peak.

They were wrong.

On my first Wednesday evening at the church, I received my first hint that this task might be more difficult than I'd imagined. After a couple of games, I gathered the students for some high-energy worship songs. Worship didn't seem to be part of what they expected, but I persisted anyway. At the end of the musical set, I leaned my guitar against an amplifier, lifted my Bible over my head, and asked, "OK, how many of you brought your Bibles?"

At first no one responded.

And that's when he said it.

A senior in high school, a five-year veteran of this particular youth group.

"This is Wednesday night *youth group*. We don't *do* Bibles here," he said. "And we don't come here to sing either. We're here to have fun."

In the silence that followed his statement, my first thought was simply, *Oh God, what am I going to do?*

Doing My Best

That question would wend its way through my mind many more times in the upcoming months. Over the next few weeks, I persisted in my focus, and I discovered that this senior wasn't alone in his motivations for attending youth events. Numbers plunged into the low double digits. Parents complained to the

pastor that their children weren't having enough fun. Church members who were unaware that the previous minister's weekly program consisted of an hour of games, horseplay, and occasional hazing, with a devotional tacked at the end, wondered why youth attendance on Wednesdays hadn't spiraled into the seventies and beyond.

What's worse, it wasn't only on Wednesdays that fewer youth were showing up. The previous youth minister provided pizza and games after church nearly every Sunday evening. Wanting to train students in spiritual disciplines, I plugged a small-group Bible study into that time slot, but only a couple of students were willing to engage in such an endeavor. Once the students discovered I didn't plan to sponsor such an event every Sunday, youth attendance plummeted on Sundays, too. The ones who *did* make an appearance on Sundays huddled together in a corner in the back of the worship center with a strong interest in note-passing and little interest in anything the pastor had to say.

I spent most of that first year torn between the conflicting expectations of the pastor, parents, students, and my own conscience. The pastor wanted greater numbers of youth and peace with the parents of these youth. The youth wanted a constant string of entertaining events. The parents wanted entertaining events too, but they also expected these activities, in some inexplicable way, to result in their children's spiritual maturity. From the perspective of these parents, I was the person hired for the tasks of discipling and entertaining their children.

For a while I remained passionate about my perceived responsibility to serve as the primary disciple-maker in these students' lives. Then, after a few months of frustration, I just wanted *out*. I tried to quit perhaps a half-dozen times during the first couple of years. I searched for other positions, but God persisted in interrupting every escape route. So I stuck it out, torn amid conflicting expectations that I could not seem to fulfill.

Near the end of my first year, I turned toward the heavens and raised a white flag of surrender. *Maybe,* I concluded, *I'm just not cut out for this ministry; but, God, until you move me, I will*

do my best to do it well. No matter what, I will work my hardest to do in this place whatever it is that you want me to do.

And I did.

What if Boredom Isn't Always Bad?

The founder of Young Life once commented, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the gospel." Is this statement true? How has this statement been applied in youth and children's ministries? How have these attitudes affected ministries to children and youth? After considering your own response to these questions, read what Mark DeVries has to say in response to the Young Life attitude: "It might be more of a sin to suggest to young people that the Christian life is always fun and never boring. Keeping teenagers from ever being bored in their faith can actually deprive them of opportunities to develop the discipline and perseverance needed to live the Christian life. It is precisely in those experiences that teenagers might describe as 'boring' that Christian character is often formed."[1] Do you agree with DeVries? Why or why not?

Questioning the Assumptions

The student ministry did seem to improve during my second year. I established relationships in a nearby middle school and led many middle-schoolers to commit their lives to Christ. I trained a cluster of committed youth to serve as spiritual leaders. The youth group grew not in leaps and bounds but in a steady and sustained way. From the perspective of my congregation and other nearby churches, I seemed to be building a successful student ministry.

And still something wasn't quite right.

In the first place, so much of the student ministry seemed to center on my capacities to disciple the youth. At first this felt quite pleasant. After all, when students had needs, many of them came to me first, even before they went to their parents. Yet I quickly discovered that neither I nor my adult volunteers could sustain the spiritual lives of this many students.

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1. M. DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994).

There was also the fact that the fragmentation in so many students' families overwhelmed our efforts to effect transformation in the students' lives. And then there was the way the youth identified anything involving the adults of the church as "boring." My first response was to create youth-focused alternatives to every adult activity, but somehow this didn't draw the students to deeper commitment. In fact, it actually seemed to feed their immaturity.

Over time I began to see that the problems ran deeper than the spiritual immaturity of this particular group of youth. The difficulties ran even deeper than *my* immaturity—though, admittedly, that had been a factor in the first few months of my ministry. The problems had to do with how I and the church envisioned and defined successful student ministry.

That's when I began to ask some painful questions about student ministry that my training in youth ministry and Christian education had not equipped me to answer. *What if,* I wondered, *this separation between students and adults—something that I was trained to see as a solution—has actually been part of the problem? What if God never intended youth ministry staff members to become the primary sustainers of students' spiritual lives? What if something is profoundly wrong with the entire way the church has structured ministries to youth and children? What if the reason so many ministers are bordering on burnout is because our ministry models are fundamentally flawed?*

I didn't find answers to all these questions during my years in youth ministry. Some of the answers came later, after I was privileged to become the associate pastor and then the senior pastor in the same congregation where I first served as youth minister (a church that, to this day, remains the most wonderful congregation of believers I have ever served). And, truth be told, I'm still working toward complete answers to a couple of these questions. After several years of research and consultation with hundreds of pastors, churches, parents, youth, and children, however, I have made a good bit of progress. I hope my progress on this journey will help you walk the path on which God has placed you.

I must admit, though, that the first step on this journey sounds a little macabre: It entails learning how to murder a one-eared Mickey Mouse.

What Causes Youth Ministers to Quit?

For many years youth ministers tended to remain only a year or two in the same congregation. In the twenty-first century, youth ministers are staying longer in their congregations. A 2002 survey of full-time youth ministers revealed an average tenure in each congregation of four years, seven months. The most frequent reasons given for leaving a church included inadequate salaries and conflicts with a senior pastor.[2]

One-Eared Mice, Well-Meaning Ministers, and the Octopus without a Brain

In the late 1980s, one student minister depicted the relationship between his ministry and the rest of his congregation as a "one-eared Mickey Mouse."[3] The head of the cartoon mouse represented the church as a whole, and the ear represented youth ministry. His point was simply this: Like the ear of the renowned rodent on Walt Disney's drawing board, his ministry was barely connected to the rest of the body. Although the student ministry and the larger congregation were technically linked, the two operated on separate tracks, with each one pursuing its own purposes and passions.

His church wasn't alone, and it still isn't.

Somehow in the past century this approach has prevailed in many churches as the dominant model for student ministry. The model has become so popular that, in many instances, it has turned into the predominant paradigm not only for youth ministry but also for preschool, children's, and singles ministries. The one-eared Mickey Mouse has metamorphosed into a multi-eared mutant—or, to use another youth leader's memorable image, something like "an octopus without a brain, a collection of arms

2. J. Grenz, "Factors Influencing Vocational Changes among Youth Ministers," *Journal of Youth Ministry* (2002): 73–88.

3. C. Clark, "From Fragmentation to Integration": www.forministry.com/vsItemDisplay.dsp&objectID=E72737BD-864C-4E53-A419FFCE44955BCF&method=display&templateID=C3435351-D45C-4B52-867A3F794D1CD85C.

acting independently with no central processing unit coordinating their actions."[4]

As this ministry model has developed, here's what has tended to happen: *Parents are not perceived as having the primary responsibility for the spiritual growth of their offspring.* Age-specific ministers in the church have increasingly embraced the primary responsibility for discipling students and children. Children and youth experience their activities and worship in virtual isolation from the remainder of the church, and parents need only drop off their progeny at the appropriate times.

In 2006, Richard Ross, a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, predicted that at some point in the future churches would begin to

> build buildings to support segregation—and they will do it with *excellence.* They will not build for racial segregation, but to support age segregation. . . . Both the natural appeal of such buildings and the programming centered there will guarantee [that] teenagers will only experience church life with people almost precisely their own age. Adults will find no ways to bless children, much less even see them. Young people will be cut off from the richness of almost all adult relationships. And, most importantly, they will not see members of their own families until it is time to meet at their cars to go home.[5]

On only one point do I disagree with Ross's assessment: What he has described is not merely the theoretical church of the future but the actual, present predicament of many current congregations.

When this programmatic model dominates a church's ministries, students' and children's ministers may see parents in passing, but they do little to transform parents' relationships with their offspring. (After all, don't Sunday school, children's church, and youth group provide the principal contexts for the disciple-

4. C. Clark, *The Youth Worker's Handbook to Family Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 24.

5. R. Ross, "What Will Church Be Like in Ten Years?" Presentation to the NNYM Executive Council, 2006: www.ymnetwork.org/future_of_YM/Churches_Future-Ross.doc.

ship of the church's students?) "Success" is defined in terms of high-energy events that students experience in virtual isolation from other generations. Such youth and children's ministries seem to expect students to become integrated with their families at home even as they model the dis-integration of their families at church.

So why has this model survived so long?

It seems to me that in many congregations a single false assumption has maintained the mutant mouse's vigor long after it should have become clear that his nose was twitching in the wrong direction. The false assumption is simply this: *Parents are not the primary persons responsible for their children's Christian formation.* The people perceived as being primarily responsible for children's spiritual development are specialized leaders of age-focused ministries. Despite the popularity of this model, here's what I wish to suggest: *This model is not biblical, and the results of this approach have not consistently reflected God's intentions for His people*.

Please don't misread my point: I am *not* claiming that age-focused ministers have unbiblical intentions. As an associate pastor, senior pastor, and now as a professor, I've worked with hundreds of ministers and would-be ministers to children and youth. As I reflect on my conversations with these men and women, I can say with complete confidence that, with few exceptions, each of them possesses a sincere and passionate desire to devise ministries that conform completely to God's Word.

I am also *not* blaming the difficulties that I've described on youth ministry. What I have described is *not* a problem with youth ministry! It is an issue that involves the assumptions and practices of the entire congregation. Furthermore, I am *not* suggesting that every church with a youth or children's minister is necessarily pursuing the maladapted model of ministry I describe in this chapter.

Here is what I *am* suggesting: The ministry models that many ministers have studied in seminaries and inherited in local churches are fundamentally flawed. As a result, well-intended ministers have attempted to pursue tasks in the sole context of

the church that God designed to occur first and foremost in another context.

That other context is the *family*.

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Structures, Schedules, and Age Segregation

Sketch your church's organizational structure. Then summarize each of your church's weekly activities. Draw lines that connect the weekly activities to elements of the organizational structure. Do your church's programs and structures contribute more to *coordination* or to *separation* within each family in your church? How could your church do a better job of bringing families together?

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