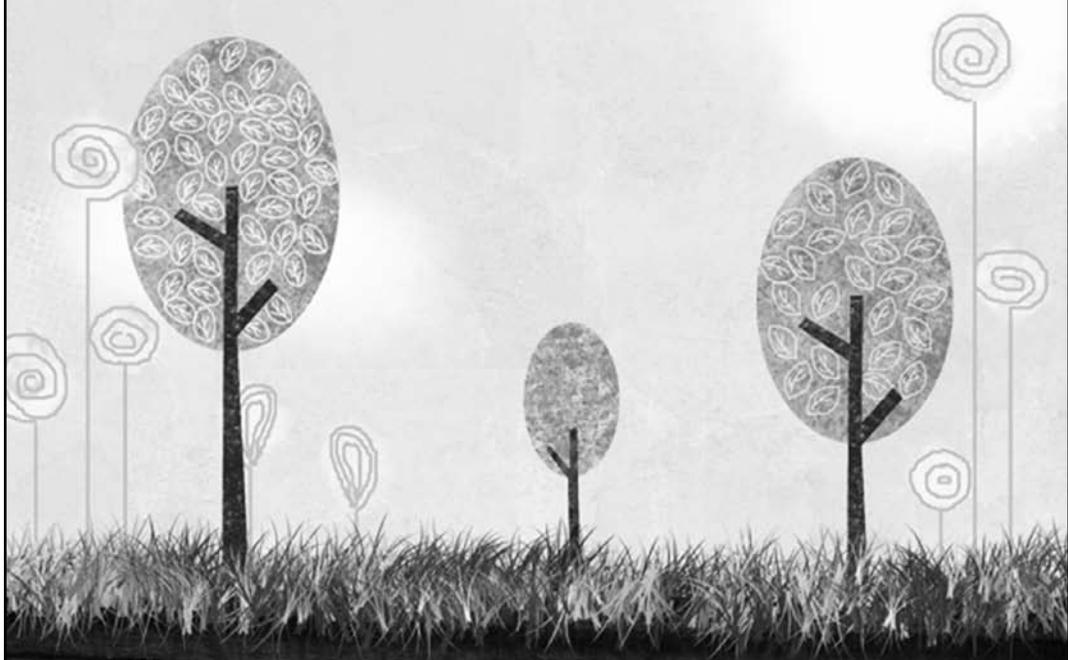


THRIVING YOUTH MINISTRY IN SMALLER CHURCHES

secrets for cultivating a dynamic youth ministry



BY

RICK CHROMEY

+ STEPHANIE GARD

Thriving Youth Ministry in Smaller Churches
Secrets for Cultivating a Dynamic Youth Ministry

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DEDICATION

To all the smaller churches that never get a dedication page in a book. This one's for you.

—*Rick Chromey*

I would like to dedicate this book to my dad, in memory of 40+ years of faithful ministry to smaller churches, and in honor of the youth at St. James UMC in St. Pete, FL.

—*Stephanie Caro*





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is that special space to thank everyone who made me who I am and essentially created this work. To be honest, that list would be long and laborious (and I would no doubt leave someone out). So I'll just keep it short and sweet.

First of all, I am deeply grateful to God for not giving up on me. Without Jesus, my life would be empty and vain. I'm also thankful for my home church (First Christian Church) in Lewistown, Montana, especially to my youth leaders and pastors who saw something in me that I did not. I'm equally deeply indebted to those who have recently shaped my life and stretched my world, particularly my friend Dr. Leonard Sweet. Len, you have ruined me for life. I love you.

I'd also like to thank all my students over the past 15 years from Boise Bible College, Saint Louis Christian College, and Kentucky Christian University. You made me a better professor and person. I pray you remember me for the good, forgive my bad, and always serve the king and the kingdom.

A special word of gratitude to all my friends and family at Group Publishing for making this book a reality, especially Nadim Najm and my editor Rob Cunningham. I have been marked by R.E.A.L. learning philosophy, and I'm proud to be part of the Group family and have friends like Thom and Joani Schultz, Rick Lawrence, and Chris Yount-Jones (to name a few). I am also indebted to Stephanie Caro, who agreed to walk beside me in this journey and offer additional insights and ideas. While I'm glad she agreed with most of my material, I'm also thankful for her disagreements and expansions of thought. This book isn't about me but about you. Stephanie brings you into the trenches of smaller church youth ministry. She's been my hands and feet.

Finally, I must confess a deep, undying gratitude to my own family. To my wife, Patti, I want to thank you for being a writer's widow. It's not a glamorous life, and I am forever grateful for allowing me to travel, speak, and bleed on paper. You have sacrificed much for my dreams and now I hope to do the same for you. Dinner dishes are on me. To my children, Rebecca and Ryan, I have similar sentiments. I am so fortunate to have kids like you who love Jesus and his church. Rebecca, I pray all your composing dreams also come true, and Ryan, keep rocking for The Rock. You are my inspiration.

To everyone else...*thanks*.





INTRODUCTION

Everywhere you look the American church is in trouble. Just listen to a few of these clarion calls of alarm:

"...the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind." (David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*.)

"A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith." (Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future*.)

"Americans today are more devoted to seeking spiritual enlightenment than at any previous time during the twentieth century. Yet, at this moment of optimum opportunity, Christianity is having less impact on people's perspectives and behaviors than ever. Why is that? Because a growing majority of people have dismissed the Christian faith as weak, outdated, and irrelevant." (George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*.)

Ouch. Talk about taking one on the church chin. Weak. Outdated. Irrelevant. And yet, the statistics don't betray those attitudes. All you have to do is review the headlines:

Most religious groups in USA have lost ground, survey finds¹

Poll: Catholics waver on faith, but like the pope²

Americans freely change or drop, their religion³

Half of all Baptist churches could be gone by 2030⁴

¹usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-american-religion-ARIS_N.htm?csp=DailyBriefing

²usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-04-13-catholic-poll_N.htm

³religions.pewforum.org/?loc=interstitialskip

⁴faithinfocus.wordpress.com/2009/06/25/understanding-the-southern-baptist-convention/

*More than 50,000 women have left the church annually in the past two decades.*⁵

*The end of Christian America (Newsweek cover)*⁶

All these statistics and studies reveal a few insightful truths. **First, the world has changed but the church is stuck.** Christianity—those who follow Christ—continues to grow but “churchianity” is clearly on the decline. The church culture is out of step with wider society and our message no longer resonates. For some this might be a badge of honor (“*Good! We’re supposed to be counter-cultural and not-of-this-world!*”) but I believe this is reckless and questionable biblical application. We can’t on one hand “separate” from the world and on the other hand fulfill the Great “Go-Mission” to “enter into the world” and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus didn’t. Peter and Paul didn’t. Countless saints throughout history didn’t. Relevance isn’t always evil, but obsolescence is always deadly.

Second, the future church will thrive in being small. The mainline, middle, and mainstream are dying and splintering into countless fragments. Micro is the new mega. Small is big. Scripture clearly roots for the underdog. David against Goliath. A boy with fish and bread. Mustard seeds. As you’ll discover in the coming chapters, being smaller is a huge advantage. We’ll just have to think differently about what that looks like—much differently.

Finally, it’s time to recapture the heart of a generation. In 25 years of powerful youth ministry resources, programming, teen curricula, edgy conferences, and national conventions, the product we’ve produced is frightening. As Christian Smith documented in his exhaustive study of teenagers, most have swallowed “moralistic therapeutic deism” as their theology. *Be good and you’ll make it to heaven. God is like a genie if you’re in need, but he’s not all that interested in our pitiful, petty lives.* It’s hardly the God revealed within Scripture, and that’s why you are so important. Youth ministry is the last chance a church gets to save, salve, and serve.

⁵foxnews.com/story/0,2933,410581,00.html
⁶newsweek.com/id/192583?GT1=43002



As youth leaders we have a great responsibility, for if we fail, the church of tomorrow is weaker for it.

When I wrote this book back in 1990 for Group, we called it *Youth Ministry in Small Churches*. It was a good title and a successful book for nearly two decades. But times have changed and so have I. That's why this book is completely new. It's some of my freshest thoughts—which in another 20 years might be frightening! I'll be honest, finding a title for this work wasn't easy. We debated it widely. I asked my Facebook friends for suggestions. Even after the book was nearly finished we were still hashing out how to boil it down to one concise, engaging, and attractive statement. We finally landed on *Thriving Youth Ministry in Smaller Churches: Secrets for Cultivating a Dynamic Youth Ministry*.

I think it says it all.

In the digital world of the 21st century—or 21C, as you'll see throughout this book—we can create a thriving youth ministry. It's only “secret” because to get there you'll have to check a lot of your youth ministry luggage at the door. Business as usual won't cut it. Copycat programs and cheap imitations won't get it done. The smaller church is the perfect place to develop disciples, deepen learning, create change, and unleash leaders. You see, I'm a product of a small church in central Montana. When I was growing up we didn't have a youth minister. Rather our church made ministers of every youth. I debuted my artistic talent on stage around age 8, doing a pastel chalk drawing of heaven while the pastor preached. I led corporate worship as a middle schooler, lip-synching my way through the songs due to a changing voice. I preached my first sermon at 13. It's no wonder I gravitated toward pastoral ministries and church leadership.

I'll be honest. I think we've lost a lot in attempts to entertain teenagers into the kingdom. Last night at our youth group I watched adults insanely work to keep students engaged, behaving, and having fun. We played a game where teenagers wrote compliments on the backs of friends. Several wrote on my back statements like: “U R Cool.” “Baldy.” “Funny.” Or “good teacher.” My favorite was from a hyper teenager named Isaac who simply wrote: “I love you.”

I'll confess that most of the comments were lame, and I'll even admit today's generation doesn't know how to compliment (all they see in the media and personally experience is criticism, complaint, and condemnation). I get it. But when a goofy kid tells you he "loves" me, it fires my jets.

You see, a lot of people think I'm too old for youth ministry. I've pursued a few jobs in larger congregations and quickly learned I wasn't "hip" enough. Obviously, I don't wear Aéropostale, listen to Taylor Swift, or watch all the TV shows teenagers love, but that's OK. It's only another reason why I love the smaller church. It even has a place for us "old salty dog" types. When I think back on my favorite youth leaders they were all over 35 and in various states of physical decline (balding, fat, gray, wrinkled). One couple smoked like a furnace. Of course we all knew it and they told us to stay away from tobacco, but I found their authenticity attractive. If God could love a leathery, smelly chain-smoker then I had a shot, too. And so do you.

I hope you'll read this book this way.

Loopy.

You heard me, right. *Loopy*. Each chapter is unique and stands on its own, so don't be afraid to start in the middle or at the end. Read a chapter a dozen times or three times or once. But read it slow. Let the ideas and insights marinate. Get out a pen and write yourself notes. Highlight favorite statements. And don't be afraid to argue with me. Go ahead and write your disagreements, agitations, or confusion in the margins. Make this book come alive. When you're finished with a chapter find someone with whom you can "talk it out." Conversation is key to change. When we read a book in isolation we lose.

I've asked Stephanie Caro, a small church youth worker, to join me in this journey. You'll love Stephanie! She's been around the block a few times in youth ministry. Between the two of us we have over 50 years logged in youth work. We hope that earns us a little respect, but if not, we can take it. Stephanie has done a masterful job in adding ideas and insights, implications and applications. She'll take my thoughts and give them wings.



You'd do well to listen to her, and I certainly encourage joining her online discussions on small church youth ministry.

Let me break this book down into four simple statements. It's about giving you the GOLD. Youth ministry in a 21C culture is different, and those who lead teenagers will need to adopt and adapt a GOLDen lens.

Grace

Organism

Loopy

Decentralized

In a nutshell, a thriving youth ministry will be immersed in grace (unconditional love and acceptance, surprise, and delight). It will be a fluid and flexible organism that changes year-to-year, month-to-month, and even Sunday-to-Sunday. It will also be loopy in its feedback, leaning upon multiple evaluation tools. And finally, the power will flow from the edges to the middle rather than vice versa. If that sounds like a smaller church in context, you're right. The smaller congregation is perfectly sized for fluidity, feedback, and freedom.

If you think about it, traditional youth ministry in most churches today is exactly the opposite. It's about conforming to rules and using incentives (prizes, food, and even money) to get students to do what they wouldn't normally do. Youth programs are highly mechanized and formulaic, led by a few solitary adults and tied to strict schedules and discipleship curriculum. Students rarely lead, except perhaps to play in the band or do a pet service project. Little to no evaluation happens to confirm effectiveness. In the majority of youth ministries today, the power flows from a single person, adult team, or office.

It's no wonder the church is losing attraction value—but it doesn't have to. The future of the church need not be bleak or weak, full of fear or frustration. With God all things are possible. With God the dead can rise. With God the storms can still. With God the blind can see.

That's what we need to thrive. Life. Purpose. Vision.

My hope is this book is the catalyst for change.

My desire is a teenager will lead the church.

My dream is that smaller congregations will grow great in influence.
My vision is for a mustard seed revolution.

In some ways this is a dangerous book. You may feel the bite or cut or scrape of a well-placed point. Just go with the sting. No pain, no gain, right? And if the title doesn't suit you, that's fine, too. Make up your own. Change the chapter titles to suit our own imagination. This book is ultimately about you, your church, and your students.

So let's go.

And I'll see you on the other side.



CHAPTER ONE SMALL IS TALL!

"You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible"
(Matthew 17:20 NLT).

"We can do no great things, only small things with great love."
(Mother Teresa)

Sometimes the best ideas pop up in the strangest of places—like Los Angeles rush hour traffic. As a city dweller, I'm no stranger to slowdowns, but it was during a particularly sticky car creep in Los Angeles that a rich insight dented my imagination.

Maybe it was because everywhere I looked there were vehicles moving at the speed of slug. Luxury cars. Big-rig trucks. Sports cars. Delivery vans. Pickups. SUVs. Nobody was going anywhere fast, and most drivers seemed oblivious to the general lack of movement. People were fiddling with their radios, checking their makeup, gulping down a sandwich—and I saw more than one driver actually reading a book. We were all trapped like fly-papered gnats to this asphalt molasses, inching along like a sea of taillights glowing red against the Southern California horizon.

And then it happened: A motorcyclist whizzed by my window, scooted between the cars ahead, and quickly disappeared. Then another passed to my right, and another, and yet another. We were stuck, but these two-wheelers sailed by unscathed and undeterred with the slowdown. Yes, it was risky to steer and cruise between the cars, but I watched in amazement as they effortlessly left me sucking on diesel fumes and watching my gas tank drain.

That's when it hit me: "*Small is tall.*" When traffic stalls or stops, the smaller you are, the greater advantage you possess. You can change lanes faster and more frequently. You can weave and work your way forward better. I'd rather be driving a Toyota than a tractor trailer in a traffic jam. And when traffic breaks loose and speeds forward, the smaller vehicles clearly win the rat race, leaving the large trucks to grind their gears.

Small is tall in an ever-changing, rapid, fluid culture, too.

The smaller you are, the more possibility you possess to navigate the jams that define contexts and the changes that impact our current culture.

A CULTURAL SHIFTING

I love taking trips with teenagers. When I wrote this chapter I was headed back to Boise from a youth leadership conference I hadn't attended in years. The week was soaked in metaphor and story about how to "Move," using Moses and the Hebrew slaves as a storyboard. Worship was experiential and celebratory, featuring streamers, balloons, hand-washing, and hugs. Students rushed the stage whenever the band played. Visual media told the stories of the Exodus in clever formats while speakers incorporated teen humor, culture, and social situations to make their points. Each day concluded with a "move" moment where teenagers expressed commitments verbally and relationally.

I was surprised how much this conference had changed.

Do you remember 1985? I do.

The Reagan revolution was in full swing, and the millennial generation was in operation birth mode. A generational shift was in the air.

"Prepare to feel obsolete.

*It's the first step to
moving ahead."*

—Elizabeth Weil, youth
culture writer

(Quoted by Leonard
Sweet in *Carpe Mañana*)



"Baby On Board" signs on minivans announced a new attitude. On television, *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* struck a nerve. In 1985, Coca-Cola changed its formula to "new" Coke and quickly discovered "classic" was a better sell. Meanwhile a strange new computer was making noise—the Apple Macintosh, introduced a year earlier. It was the opening of the personal computing window.

Something was also happening in the church. A boomer generation tired of sowing its wild oats with '70s permissiveness pursued a spiritual awakening that spawned a New Age movement and "megachurch" emergence in places like Willow Creek and Saddleback. The boomer generation that returned to church brought a desire for fresh worship (praise songs vs. hymns), relevant preaching topics, and quality youth and children's ministries.

What few realized was something even deeper was also happening. It wasn't just a normal generational shifting but a cataclysmic cultural earthquake. Everything was about to change, and technology was the epicenter, particularly emerging "mega-techs" like the cellular phone and the Internet.

The mid-'80s technology was still primitive by today's standards. Televisions and phones were tethered to cable and cord. Personal music was a cassette in a Sony Walkman. Popular video games included Galaga or Pac-Man (though an upstart named Nintendo was catching on). The digital revolution remained a future, unseen reality. Few people a quarter century ago could imagine downloads, file sharing, web surfing, texting, IMing, MP3s, JPEGs, GPS, DVR, or e-mail. Who could imagine a cell phone "computer" that could record an event and instantly communicate it to the world?



“It is time to listen carefully. Can you hear the grind and groan as the tectonic plates of our culture shift? We live on the fault lines of a widespread cultural change. Institutions are in decline. Ancient spiritualities have re-emerged. World music has collided with pop music. The center looks out to the edge. In the midst of all this change, innovative expressions of church and worship are emerging across the globe. New approaches to creativity, community, and ritual are being practiced in small towns and urban centers. There’s a fresh understanding of what the church can be in the midst of this tension between the old and the new.”

—Steve Taylor, New Zealand pastor and author *The Out of Bounds Church?*

Who could imagine playing a video game so realistic you could hurt yourself physically? Who could imagine watching movies in your car or live television at 30,000 feet?

Who could imagine that wireless and web technology could alter and rearrange cultural dialects? Television helped ignite the tech revolution in the 1960s. By 1985, technology had effectively moved our culture from a Gutenberg word-based world into a multi-visual experience where story, metaphor, and parable became “eye-deas.” In 1981, music television (MTV) was born but it would take Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video to change the genre into story. The World Wide Web found its cultural traction in 1994 when Netscape opened the portal for average Joes and Janes to “surf the Web.” The cell phone was a novelty item for the rich and famous, but it eventually found a tipping point with the masses. In fact, the year 2000 marked a socio-techno shifting as the whole world went “flat” (according to columnist and author Thomas Friedman). I would further add that the world has gone F-A-T. Fluid. Accessible. Temporary.

In less than a decade, our world evolved from a modern mechanical machine to a postmodern hyper-relational body. Suddenly one size didn’t fit all. Everything was different. You could *feel* it.

David is a typical teenager. Sit with him at lunch and his cell phone buzzes text alerts as he chats about the latest YouTube video or iTunes song he downloaded. David’s world is highly personalized. He lives by his iPod’s playlist, creating music for every mood, situation, or occasion. David’s world is a mouse click away. He buys, learns, connects, researches, maps, and shares secrets online.

In his free time he creates digital videos, plays online games, and searches for new friends on Facebook. In David's world everything is fluid. Everything connects, converses, and communes.

David's world is also amazingly accessible. It's 24/7/365. His cell phone and web connection create instant communication. When Michael Jackson died, David didn't hear the news from NBC or CNN but from his Facebook phone feed. He routinely texts his friends during church with encouraging thoughts, insights, and applications he's learning from the sermon. David finds his answers on life by searching Google or by texting "ChaCha" for the answer. David never gets lost when driving, thanks to a GPS gift from his folks. He never misses a television show. If he forgets to DVR, he just heads to Hulu to catch the episode. Finally, this new world has made everyone a publisher, including David, who blogs on his favorite blues artists and posts his own ideas on the Bible at various online discussion boards.

Of course, all this change has its edge and consequence. For David, it's created a temporary and disposable culture. He'll pay \$3 to drink water from plastic but knows that bottle will take eternity to decompose. He's lost more than one paper for failure to "save," and one time his failure to back up a hard drive cost him thousands of precious photographs and videos. For David, his greatest fear was a fatal error message until he discovered online storage "in a cloud" at Carbonite. David changes e-mail addresses and passwords routinely.

David lives in a completely different world than most adults over 35 experienced as teenagers. He loves Jesus but finds church boring compared to his life.

"If the prospect of this flattening—and all of the pressures, dislocations, and opportunities accompanying it—causes you unease about the future, you are not alone nor wrong. Whenever civilization has gone through one of these disruptive, dislocating technological revolutions—like Gutenberg's introduction of the printing press—the whole world has changed in profound ways. But there is something about the flattening of the world that is going to be qualitatively different from other such profound changes: the speed and breadth with which it is taking hold."

—Thomas L. Friedman, journalist and author
The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century



“The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80% of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.”

—Reggie McNeal,
missional leader
and author
*Present Future: Six Tough
Questions for the Church*

It’s hard to sit still for an hour listening to others sing, talk, and serve. His smaller church of 125 tries to be relevant with PowerPoint sermons and praise songs, but he still feels disconnected. He senses God’s presence the most when he’s serving soup for the homeless or riding his bike or playing his guitar (all of which he does on his own outside of his church).

David hungers to know God and to have a relationship with Jesus. He just doesn’t see why he has to go to church to have that connection. After all, in his wireless world he has instant access and immediate gratification. He wants to sense God daily, not just once a week.

SO WHAT’S IT ALL MEAN?

In 1985 the photo print shops were big business, but few photo giants (like Kodak and Polaroid) recognized the coming digital age would effectively end the era of print photography. A digital photo could be cropped, resized, recolored, and, most importantly, easily stored by a person. The middle man was gone. Few people need a processor anymore, especially if they own a computer and printer. We print what we want, when we want. We take endless photos and delete the bad, ugly, or out of focus. The consumer, not a company, is now in control.

Everything has changed. In 2008, Polaroid filed for bankruptcy. The next year, Kodak announced its legendary Kodachrome film was history. Film was obsolete. Paper may be next, as digital photo frames that flash hundreds of photos are more engaging than a single photograph on a wall.

Obsolescence happens. And the smaller church better not overlook its own potential to grow archaic.

