

# Why we must reject American models of Youth Ministry

As we begin it may be helpful to give you some introduction to who I am and what I have been doing.

## Preamble

*Where this paper is coming from*

I have been involved in youth ministry for just over 20 years. I have run (or helped run) youth groups in four different churches in four different socio-economic areas of Sydney. I have ministered in a beachside suburb, a leafy upper middle class private school suburb, a first homebuyer new housing development, and in a working class, government supported housing area in a church plant.

I have also traveled across Australia as a youth ministry advisor speaking to hundreds of youth leaders from Perth to Lithgow. I tell you this because I see myself as someone who has listened to the struggles of the average youth minister (paid and volunteer). I have visited countless churches and observed their youth ministries (or lack thereof).

I see myself as a practitioner of youth ministry rather than a theorist. My desire is for youth ministry in Australia to be done in a way that is first and foremost Christian. I also want to promote a model of ministry that is practical (by this I mean 'do-able') and effective in achieving results. I also want to see a brand of youth ministry that suits the Australian psyche.

I am committed to the Scriptures and using them as a measuring rod for all matters in faith and practice (including youth ministry). Finally, for all you fair dinkum Aussies, I am an American who has become an Australian citizen.

## Introduction

I grew up as a typical insular American. My entire knowledge about Australia came through the song 'Tie me kangaroo down sport'. (Add to this "throw another shrimp on the barbie and you have summed up the total body of knowledge on Australia for most Americans).

My first introduction to the real Australia was at a boat dock in Kauai, Hawaii. I was living on a boat at the time and I saw a yacht from Australia called "Fair dinkum". To my ears this was the strangest phrase I had ever heard. My buddy and I mocked it and laughed for days. However, few months later I met my first Aussies and they educated us as to the meaning of this puzzling phrase. They told us that it meant true or trustworthy or 'for real'. I still thought was odd but accepted it and moved on. It is ironic that many years later I have come to use this expression quite often myself. I will often exclaim "Fair dinkum" in amazement or exasperation. Or I will use it to describe something that is genuine, real and true (such as, "Fair dinkum this was a good youth ministry conference!").

For those of you who need enlightenment on the phrase, a quick search on the net brought these definitions for 'fair dinkum',

"True or genuine" (The Macquarie ABC Dictionary)

"Early on it could also mean something honest, reliable or genuine, though this is actually first recorded in New Zealand, in 1905. Fair dinkum is recorded from 1890 in the sense of fair play, and soon after in the way that Australians and New Zealanders still use it—of something reliable or genuine. There have been lots of related phrases since, like dinkum oil for an accurate report. .... it originally meant, 'work'. In *Robbery Under Arms*, Rolf Boldrewood writes, "It took us an hour's hard dinkum to get near the peak". From this came fair dinkum – originally meaning "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay". (Kel Richards, *Word Watch*, A News & Parliamentary Radio).

Why do I tell you about the delights of this strange phrase? It is my contention that youth ministry today is, for the most part, *not* fair dinkum. We have left undone what we ought to have done and have not done what we

ought to have done. However, we don't need mercy. Instead, we need to overhaul much of what we understand to be best practice in youth ministry. We need to change our systems and our way of thinking.

Why do I say this? *Because from my observations youth ministry is in a sad state.* How have I come to this conclusion (and some of you will need no convincing of this fact)? There are a number of reasons. I will outline five.

## **My observations on the struggles most of us share in youth ministry**

### **Numbers**

Most of our churches are not characterized by good solid numbers.<sup>1</sup> While we must not equate health with numbers, it is a concern that many (most??) churches either have no youth ministry or a very small one. In my experience any group over 12 is to be considered 'large'. (This goes against many people's misconception that the average youth group is 30-40 in number).

I have found that what most churches do is to point to "the large church down the road" and assume that having a large youth group is normal and their own small group is abnormal. In truth, they are normal. It is the large group that is not.

There is real irony here. If you spend some time reflecting on what is the driving force of most youth ministry in Australia is the desire for numerical growth. We run our programs at a time that is hopefully attractive to the non-Christian. We give our groups names designed to be attractive (NRG, Explosion, Hype etc). We meet at a time that is geared toward numerical growth (Friday nights). And finally, we fill our programs with content designed to be attractive (the main culprit being pointless games, entertainment and social activities).

However, many mainline denominations are now in the state where over one half of their churches are without a youth ministry altogether. While it is cliché to say that the church is only one generation away from extinction (God's church is bigger than that) we are in an unenviable situation.

It is odd to note that never in the history of the church has there been so many resources designed to help us grow a youth ministry. They don't appear to be working.

### **Longevity and Continuity**

Our next problem is the pathetic dropout rate among the young people in our groups. Most groups see the vast majority of the teenagers up and leave after a few weeks or months. In the end the leaders are left with a few kids who survived and probably came from a church family anyway.

If you want to undertake a disheartening experiment, visit a number of churches in your denomination scanning for young people. You probably won't find many. Or, ask around to find out how many people in the congregation were reached by the youth group years ago and are still attending. In my denomination many churches have an evening service that is generally seen to be for the 'younger generation'. Most of these services are small and struggling despite the church having run a youth program for a number of years.

It appears as though our lack of effective youth ministry is contributing to a dearth of 18-40 year old across the board. Far too many churches have little or nothing to show for decades of youth ministry. In fact, they are characterized by a sad geometry. As the young people grow older, there are less of them around.

### **Malnourishment**

Problem three is the impoverished spiritual state of our young people. They have been fed a diet of sport and rec with a short devotion telling them that 'God has a wonderful plan for their life if they turn to Jesus' with little else. It is no wonder that many of these young people grow up to be fragile Christian adults.

(As a footnote it is interesting to see the explosive growth of the Katoomba convention and leadership training movement in N.S.W. Would this be as successful if youth groups were doing their jobs properly?).

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<sup>1</sup> I realise that 'good solid numbers' is a difficult phrase to define and there might be some disagreement as to its make up. To my mind I define good numbers as any number that promotes the feeling of strength and health. As a rule of thumb, I'd say anything over 15.

## **Leadership burnout**

The fourth problem I encounter is the incredible fatigue among our youth leaders. Youth leadership in our churches resembles a revolving door. A year or two is about all we can expect from the average paid youth minister. Even less for a volunteer.

If we are ever faced with the situation of having to ask the congregation for volunteers to help out in the youth ministry we are usually faced with one of two responses. We will either see most of the adults look at the ground hoping that suddenly they have become invisible. Or, we will see a look of stark terror that says, "A few years back I felt so pressured by the senior minister that I decided to help with the youth group. I think it was called 'Chaos for Christ' or something like that. I lasted about four months. My therapist doesn't think I'm quite ready to give it another shot."

## **Community misconception**

Many of the locals in our suburbs see the church as a community centre where they have yoga rather than a place where a group of young people meet each week because of Jesus. When you ask the some of the locals their impression of the youth group that meets in the church they will either say, "Huh? The what?" Or, they will smile and say, "Oh yes. I used to go to youth group. We played some lovely games and learned how to be nice. Its where I met my husband you know!"

We must not kid ourselves; we are having minimal community impact.

When I look at youth ministry I shake my head and say 'fair dinkum'. How could it be this bad?

*The answer, of course, is to blame the Americans!*

## **What we have inherited from America: the 'ills' of the 'als'.**

If you walk around an average Aussie street you will see young people wearing fashions straight out of VH-1 and the hip hop L. A. culture. You will eat at fast food restaurants keen to supersize you built by multi-national food chains out of America. If you go to a youth group, you will no doubt find a model that has been shipped over by a book-selling-mega-successful-American-youth-minister.

While the Australian culture has usually had a well-founded skepticism about Yankee imports, it has embraced the models of youth ministry from America with open arms.

While there are a number of 'als' that have influenced youth ministry (incarnational, relational etc.) I will only examine two (Please note that while they are different on the surface there are some deep similarities).

### **'AI' #1: Attractional**

In 1938 Jim Rayburn, a Presbyterian minister, was told to go to the local high school and see this as 'his parish'. He began a program of singing, skits and a Bible talk. They took the radical step of meeting in people's homes rather than the church. Hence, Young Life was born. This was an example of a new wave of youth ministry in America. There are several other similar stories which have birthed youth movements designed to reach generations of lost young people (Youth for Christ etc.). The idea is simple, instead of running a program for Christian young people, you run a program designed to attract the outsider and then bring them to faith in Christ. It didn't take long until these programs would take a sideways step and bring in entertainment as a way of reaching young people. After all, young people have a lot of energy and are always searching for something new and fun. What better place to provide it than the church?

Borgman states, "In the 1940s ... television had not yet arrived, so these young people -as a former Youth for Christ worker put it-'didn't know what to do on a Saturday night.' The churches were not addressing 'youth ministry', so to fill the 'entertainment void' and reach young people with the gospel, 'God raised up organizations like Young Life and Youth for Christ ...'" (As quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba The Class of '00", *Christianity Today*: February 3, 1997.) This led to a night of music followed by a gospel presentation

This 'new' program has morphed into what passes for much of youth ministry today.

The issue at stake here is what was/is used to attract non-Christians to the gathering. Throughout the decades this has changed according to the culture of the day. There has been bbq's, dances, concerts, games nights, moshes- whatever young people are in to.

This desire to attract young people is also why many churches have debated whether or not to turn a perfectly good carpark into a skateboard park!

### **'AI' #2: *Intentional programming***

The most common form of youth ministry today is intentional programming. This is a natural evolution from the attractional style above. This is simply a strategy of running a system of events intended to hit a target audience. The goal is to move them from outsider to disciple through various events or programs. Generally there is a geometric diagram associated with this. There are funnels, archery targets, baseball diamonds, and layered wedding cakes.

In the recent past the most famous proponent of this style of ministry was Duffy Robbins. In fact Robbins has been called the 'most influential youth ministry strategist of the 1980's and '90's.'<sup>2</sup> His strategy for youth ministry is the famous 'funnel'. The idea is simple; the non-Christian is at the top of the funnel. Your hope is to move them down through various programs or activities. At the end the drop out a keen disciple of Jesus. He writes,

“For a youth program to be well rounded, accomplishing the purpose for which it was designed, there must be some type of formal or informal programming that will meet the needs of kids at each of these levels of commitment. There need to be Come Level programs, geared to the student who is “not into religion at all,” and there need to be programs that will motivate the forward progress and growth of those at the Grow, Disciple, and Develop Levels.” (Duffy Robbins, *Youth Ministry That Works*, p. 79,80)

At present the most famous proponent of this model of ministry is Doug Fields. His baseball diamond is the funnel revisited (I won't point out the fact that real Aussies play cricket!).

### **Jabbing a needle into the ills (Or, an Aussie perspective on American youth ministry imports)**

These two forces in youth ministry have dictated almost everything we Aussies do in youth ministry. And criticising them is a bit like knocking your mother's cooking- you have grown up on it and it has sustained you whether you like it or not.

However, it must be done in the search for 'fair dinkum' youth ministry.

There are a number of issues that must be addressed here. (I need to say straight out that what is not at question is the integrity of the proponents of these ministry strategies. They appear to be godly men and women who are keen to see Jesus lifted high in this dead world).

However, there are a number of questions that must be raised.

1. *We must not divorce the American culture from the American church.* Those of us who have visited churches in the U.S.A. may have had a disconcerting experience. We drive through the 1000 car parking lots in amazement. We scratch our heads as we walk through the buildings with their thermostatically controlled windows (they open and shut according to the temperature!). We marvel at the coifed preacher (“how does he do that with his hair?”). This experience can lead you to believe that not only are you in another country, you are on another planet!

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<sup>2</sup> (Dean, Clark, Rahn, *Starting Right-Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, Youth Specialties, Zondervan Publishing House 2001. p. 112.)

No doubt some of us have muttered under our breath, “Fair dinkum, I’m not in Oz anymore!” We must be careful when we import a youth ministry strategy from this culture. It is a culture that calls itself ‘Christian’. We have moved from this. It is a culture that cares about what it’s leader believes. We don’t. It is a culture of ‘churchianity’ as well as Christianity.

2. *We must remember that ‘the business of America is business!’* I am often asked, “Is Australia much different from America?” Yes, Virginia it is. The lifeblood of the USA is the free enterprise system. This underpins the whole of the economy. It also appears to direct the way the church does business. Growth is king. Bigger is better. More people mean you are doing a better job (Really!?).

For Star Trek fans the prime directive of the American church seems to be “Grow, grow, grow” No doubt many of us will feel a bit uncomfortable with this as it often leads to sacrificing quality for the sake of quantity. It can also lead to a consumerism and ‘come and go’ mentality among its visitors.

I have never quite uncovered what ‘the business of Australia is’. I am sure that it is not business! Having a barbie with mates may be more where we are at.

In short, youth ministry Australian style must be built on concepts other than free enterprise.

3. *We must be careful of shallowness.* There is a famous expression used to describe the church in America, “It is a mile wide and an inch deep!” (Some here might be tempted to use this to describe the culture in general!). I do not believe this is true here in Australia. I was immediately struck by the ‘fair dinkumness’ of the Australian culture. Most people keep their mouths shut if they have nothing to say. While it takes a while to get to know people, once you do you tend to go to a deeper level (My experience of Americans is that they will tell you all about their houses, jobs, nieces, and pets straight away. They’ll even show you a raft of photos. However, if you ask them about deeper issues they will often exclaim, “My, now you’re asking personal questions!” (Personal is pronounced *purrseenol*). Aussies like the genuine, what feels right and true. They tend to run from froth and bubble. Youth ministry built on shallow attraction is just that, shallow.

4. While I can’t go into it at length, I must ask the question, “*Is entertainment a valid concept for Christian youth ministry?*” In my experience and my reading of Scripture, methinks not. It is not our mandate nor are we any good at it (anyone ever been to a beach mission bush dance or talent quest?).

When I ponder our relationship to entertainment I find it deeply disturbing that we even went down that road. There are a number of other, more worthy avenues to take (social justice etc.). Why rock bands and games? Do we really think that this is attractive to the average Aussie young person?

We must do some soul searching as to what is really ‘fair dinkum attractive’.

5. *Miscellaneous other issues.* There are a number of other things I could say against what we have inherited. It isn’t producing results, it is hard to do, and the Early Church didn’t do it. I won’t go into these. You can read about that someplace else.

In short, it saddens me to say this my Aussie brothers and sisters, but youth ministry in the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit appears to have been more influenced by the mega churches in California and Illinois than by the Bible on our bedside table.

### **Some recent trends against ‘attraction’ and ‘intention’**

Before we draw the threads together and form a conclusion it is interesting to note that there appears to be a growing awareness in the USA that attractional/intentional youth ministry is struggling. Many youth leaders are waking up to the fact that the Willow Creek and Saddleback are not normal churches that offer us a realistic paradigm for youth ministry. Others are seeing the spiritual damage that a high component of entertainment can cause.

One youth leader writes,

“For five years I followed the typical youth group structure- singing, crowd breakers, entertaining activities. We even spent a little time talking about Christ. But sometime between wiping egg off the floor from our latest gag ... the question hit me: What am I doing? I realized our youth program wasn't imparting to kids the essentials for their spiritual growth. Even I relate with Christ as though he were a vaguely remembered distant relative than an energizing friend. Our program based ministry, since it did little to change kids, had burned me out.”

(Jeff Anderle, “High School Minister”, p. 14 *Youthworker Journal*, Winter 1995.)

However, the disappointment (in intentional programming) has led to a number of equally disappointing trends.

1. The first trend is to point out the problem (lack of numbers, longevity etc.) and then shrug your shoulders and say, “Does anyone have a solution?” Mike Yaconelli, the founder of Youth Specialties and quite possibly the grandfather of American youth ministry did this a year ago He wrote, “So let's be honest. Youth ministry as an experiment has failed. If we want to see the church survive, we need to rethink youth ministry. What does that mean? I don't have a clue. But my hunch is that if we want to see young people have a faith that lasts, then we have to completely change the way we do youth ministry in America. I wonder if any of us has the courage to try.” (“The Failure of Youth Ministry”, *Youthworker Journal*, May/June 2003).

This article created an uproar. It is also reflective of one response. “Its not working, but what the heck are we supposed to do?”

2. The second trend is to claim to abandon the ship of attraction only to quietly climb back on board. What I mean is that some are cloaking the old way of doing things with the mantle of discipleship. This is the recent trend in Sydney with some youth groups and authors. They preach discipleship but are running the same old program of entertainment with a Bible talk. The only difference is, the Bible talk tends to be a bit longer than it used to be (This keeps them kosher).

3. The third response is the most baffling. This is where we isolate the problem and then discuss emerging trends in culture (post modernism etc.) but then come up with the same tired solutions. I was recently at a high-powered youth ministry conference and it seemed like every other paper would end up saying, “Young people today are highly spiritual and desperate for an intense community experience. The old way of doing youth ministry just won't cut it anymore. Therefore we need to come up with some better entertainment and play some better games!” In other words we recognize the need for feeding this ‘new’ spiritual hunger amongst young people yet still only offer them mindless entertainment. (For some reason the song ‘Kum Ba Yah tends to be trotted out and battered at these conferences like a well worn piñata. Have any Christians actually sung this song in the last 30 years?).

I'm tired of dissecting the problem and providing no answers. Maybe this is the postmodern way but it is empty and hollow. Nor is it Christian.

### **Towards a (long winded) conclusion**

One of my favourite films of all time is the original Batman movie (the real one with Adam West, not the fraudulent version of the '80s with Michael Keaton). In one of the more memorable scenes Batman is running around on a boat dock with a bomb trying to dispose of it safely. As he runs from one side to the other he exclaims, “Some days you just can get rid of a bomb.” In the same way it is very difficult to let these models of ministry go- in many ways they are part and parcel of who we are.

However, it is time to let go of what we have adopted from overseas as we head towards developing a much more effective, ‘fair dinkum’ Christian youth ministry. (Please note that these are not in the order of importance.)

### *Rethink our strategic priorities*

The first thing we must do is to rethink where we put our time and effort in youth ministry. It is my strong contention that if you have any young people in your church at all you must focus your immediate energies on

bringing them to maturity in Christ. Teach them to pray, to live a life of worship, to understand God's word. Mentor them. Help them to serve their brothers and sisters. Teach them to be holy.

In our desperate attempt to win the outsider we have sacrificed too many Christian teenagers on the altar of evangelism.

Following on from this we must

*Rethink our understanding of effective evangelism*

The best evangelism is people based not program based. Most of us know this. Therefore we must raise up a new generation of young people who are 'salt and light' and 'live such good lives among the pagans that although they accuse (them) of doing wrong they may see (their) good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us' (Matt. 5:13-16 & 1Pet. 2:12).

Our goal must be to develop young people who have a 'contagious holiness' that is evident and attractive.

We must also abandon any hope of running a program designed to be attractive through entertainment or sport. Our attraction lies in us and the message of Jesus. The day of the program being like a Pied Piper playing the flute to attract the rats has gone.

*Therefore, we must seriously reconsider our marriage to entertainment*

Getting rid of entertainment in youth ministry is like taking a bone away from a dog. Most youth leaders just don't want to do it. However, it must be done. We are called to be makers of disciples not people who fill up dates on a bored teenager's social calendar.

*A Strategic overhaul of our systems*

We must develop a long-term approach to ministry where our children's ministry (assuming your church has one) is linked with the youth ministry. This is then linked in with the young adults ministry. In other words, we must under the sad geometry of our churches (as they get older, they get fewer). The strategic youth leader will see that real growth comes long term. They will do everything in their strength to ensure that young people grow to be strong adults.

*Similarly, we must link the youth ministry with the overall church.*

Too often the youth group is seen as some satellite that 'hovers somewhere around the church and then comes crashing down like Skylab'. Or, it is seen as 'that group of young people who move the furniture around and scuff up the holy table'. Our goal must be to strategically link the youth group to the adults in the church. They must have an intimate relationship in worship, in service and in evangelism. We must seek to have older leaders. We must have members of the congregation assist with youth ministry.

I would even suggest that we avoid the temptation to run a service merely for young people.

*We must promote a longevity of leadership*

This almost goes without saying. We must have youth leaders who around for at least one high school generation (in NSW this is six years).

*We must leave the numbers game to the Americans*

It is not a sin to be small. In fact, there are many quite influential movements that numerically may be quite small (i.e. the Boy Scouts, St. John's first aid etc. It has been said countless times before but our aim is quality not quantity.

*Finally, we must see that youth ministry is hard work. It is 'dinkum'*

Ministry is rarely easy. Youth ministry is no different. It takes time and effort. It is three steps forward and two steps back.

Final, final words. It is my contention that God has raised up a generation of spiritually hungry young people longing for Christian community. This postmodern culture has raised up quite possibly the easiest generation to reach in a long time. They long for meaning. They are searching for community. They want to participate and connect with the things of God.

Fair dinkum, will any of us try and get it right this time?