



*Youth Ministry That Transforms: A comprehensive analysis of the hopes, frustrations, and effectiveness of today's youth workers*

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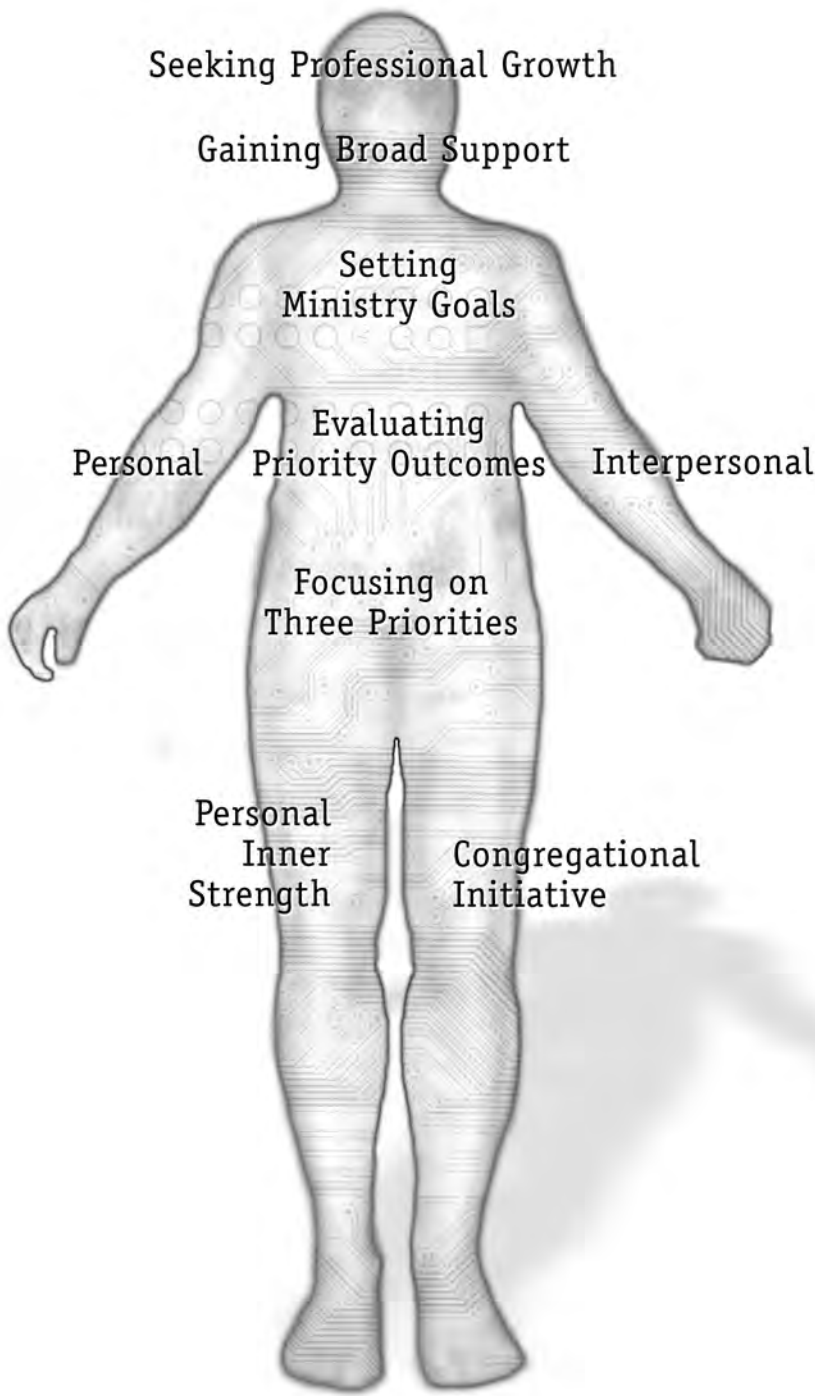
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# Chapter 1

## A Recent Invention: The Profession of Youth Ministry

Merton Strommen

It may seem strange to call youth ministry a recent invention. After all, efforts to serve youth have been with us for a long time.

One can go back to 1524 and hear Martin Luther addressing the civil magistrates of all the cities of Germany, saying, “I pray all of you for the sake of God and of youth, not to think slightingly of educational problems. For it is a serious and great matter, at the heart of Christ and all mankind, that we help and advise the young people.”<sup>1</sup>

### The roots of American youth work

Within our own country we can go back to 1724 when the devout and zealous Cotton Mather, pastor to colonial Americans, organized societies to sustain the faith of young people. It was a time, according to historian Frank Otis, when impurity, infidelity, and intemperance were rife. At the funeral of pastor’s widow Mrs. Mary Norton, for instance, mourners consumed 51 gallons of wine.

Another case in point: in his Fast Day sermon, a colonial pastor lamented, “Vast numbers, young and old, male and female, are given to intemperance, so it is a common thing to see drunken women as well as drunken men.”<sup>2</sup>

In such a setting Cotton Mather published the pamphlet “Proposals for the Revival of Dying Religion,” whose preamble included—

**We, whose names are underwritten, having by the grace of God been awakened in our youths to a serious concern about the things of our everlasting peace, and to an earnest desire suitably and religiously ‘to remember our Creator in the days of our youth’ and to give our hearts into the service of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, do covenant and agree together.**<sup>3</sup>

Societies that formed as a result of Mather’s proposals met weekly for prayer, Bible study, and singing. Mather noted that these societies “proved to be strong engines to uphold godliness.” He also observed,

however, that these societies “were frowned on by the Puritan fathers, who viewed them as a dangerous innovation.”<sup>4</sup>

In September 1860 an incident of historical importance in the development of youth societies occurred: a young people’s prayer meeting was formed in Brooklyn’s Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. Its format, according to its pastor, Theodore Cuyler, was the highly successful prayer-meeting approach of the YMCA—the example and model Cuyler needed for his congregation. When 40 youth and young adults signed the constitution he had developed, they agreed that the purpose of their society should be the conversion of souls, the development of Christian character, and the training of new converts in religious work. Significantly, this statement of purpose later found its way into the constitutions of youth societies organized by most of the principal denominations.<sup>5</sup>

Other congregations soon imitated Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church’s weekly-prayer-meeting approach. It was not long until a Young People’s Association had been formed, which linked these congregational youth organizations together.

## **The legacy of Christian Endeavor**

This same prayer-meeting approach powerfully influenced Dr. Francis Clark when he established his Christian Endeavor society in 1881.<sup>6</sup> Clark developed an organizational model for the youth of his congregation—one that was both highly structured and demanding. This model proved to be so successful in gaining members and developing intense loyalties that most church bodies soon adopted it. Central to his organizational plan was a Christian Endeavor Society pledge that was to be taken by all members (although some denominations chose not to adopt it):

**Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do; that I will make it a rule of my life to pray, and to read the Bible every day, and to support my own church in every way, especially by attending all her regular Sunday and mid-week services, unless prevented by some reason which I can conscientiously give to my Savior, and that, just so far as I know how, throughout my whole life, I will endeavor to lead a Christian life.**

**As an active member, I promise to be true to all my duties, to be present at, and to take part, aside from singing, in every Christian Endeavor prayer meeting, unless hindered by some reason which I**

**can conscientiously give to my Lord and Master. If obliged to be absent from the monthly consecration meeting of the society I will, if possible, send at least a verse of scripture to be read in response to my name at the roll-call.<sup>7</sup>**

It is amazing that this pledge, required in all Christian Endeavor Societies, did not deter but rather contributed to the organization's attractiveness. Clark's Societies sprang up all over the U.S. Endeavor societies were established in the Navy, in prisons, in schools, in police stations, and on mission fields.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to overstate how popular the Christian Endeavor approach made youth work. During the 1890s national conventions were held in Boston, Cleveland, Chattanooga, Toronto, and Indianapolis. The largest Christian Endeavor convention was held in Boston in 1895, when 56,000 people attended.<sup>9</sup> These conventions became the model for ones held later by denominational youth organizations.

Although the youth groups in most of the Protestant denominations became affiliated with the Society of Christian Endeavor and as affiliates adopted its general format, some denominations eventually organized their *own* youth organizations: the Epworth League, the Walther League, and the Luther League, to name a few.

Southern Baptists, for example, were unsatisfied with the Christian Endeavor approach, citing its failure to link young people with the church. They feared a loss of loyalty among their own youth and a lack of affiliation with the denomination. So they organized and sponsored their own youth groups. The first to be formed in 1884 was called the "Baptist Young People's Union," a youth organization that was officially recognized and established as a denominational organization in 1893.<sup>10</sup>

Another group that chose not to affiliate with the Society of Christian Endeavor was the Lutherans. Their first successful attempt to organize young people's work in any Lutheran congregation was in 1851, when 70 young men in a Lutheran congregation formed a society that became a model for other groups. These societies officially organized in 1893 as the Walther League, for the declared purpose of "keeping young people in the true Lutheran Church."<sup>11</sup> The Luther League and Epworth Leagues were similarly formed.

Separate and deeply denominational though these organizations were, it was Christian Endeavor that had inspired their creation.

## **The first professional youth leaders**

It is difficult to nail down exactly when professionals emerged on the scene to give full-time attention to youth work. We do know that in 1915

a Protestant church body employed a worker to devote full time to youth work on a denominational level—and the hiring of other professional leaders on a denominational level soon followed.<sup>12</sup> The Young People’s Luther League hired its first full-time field secretary in 1919, and the Walther League hired its first full-time executive secretary in 1920.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Denominational professionals***

Professional leaders on the denominational level preceded the advent of youth ministers serving congregations. Some of these professionals were hired by a department of religious education, others by the denomination’s youth organization, and some by their denomination’s youth department. In many cases these leaders (almost always men) were financed by “Youth Sunday” offerings and contributions made by the youth themselves.

Any help a congregation needed for its youth program came from the denomination’s headquarters in the form of services provided by the professional executives and their staff. These people supplied program materials, resources, and training in conducting meetings and running a youth organization. These extensive services were highly appreciated by churches.

Youth functioning as members of a league or society assumed the responsibility of electing their own officers and secretaries. The ones they elected were given several days of training at denominational workshops on how to carry out their role and promote the purposes of their youth organization. These youth, ranging in age from 13 to 22, owned their youth organization—it was theirs, and they ran it with the assistance of adult advisers.

I joined a professional staff of denominational youth leaders in 1944 and came to know the unique camaraderie that characterized these leaders. We felt part of history in launching a much-needed frontier activity. I found these leaders to be bright, articulate, creative, and dedicated churchmen eager to serve their Lord and church. We sought to learn from each other, keenly aware of the fact that we were blazing new trails and writing the books on youth work.

### ***The golden years***

By the 1950s professional staffs in most denominations had expanded considerably, and their services to congregations were now enjoying both a welcome and wide commendation. These were the golden years in congregational youth work. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (one of seven different Lutheran bodies) during the 1950s, for example, had six professional staff in its home office and seven regional youth directors out in the field assisting congregations.

Other denominations had as many as 15 professionals, and most had at least five to ten such people. The most impressive array of such specialists were found in the Southern Baptist Convention, whose national youth ministry staff early totaled 50 professionals.<sup>14</sup> These professional youth directors came to be viewed quite favorably in their respective denominations.

When the Lutheran World Federation held its assembly in Minneapolis in 1957, a parade of church leaders was held down Nicollet Avenue, the principal avenue that wound its way through the business district. The significance that youth work held in that denomination was demonstrated in the parade: among the assembly's notables waving to the crowd that filled the sidewalks were seven convertibles with seven Lutheran youth directors. This would not be likely to happen today.

A milestone of Protestant youth work was the youth ministry evaluation in 1955, conducted by the Committee on Youth Work of the National Council of Churches. Under the leadership of Helen Spaulding, director of Christian Education Research, this national survey identified how youth of seventeen participating denominations felt about their youth program. Randomly selected youth and young adults in 188 congregations were interviewed by denominational youth directors and professors of church colleges and seminaries.

It is interesting how apparently positively the respondents were about church at a time when there were hardly any paid congregational youth ministers. When asked "Is the church a really vital factor in your life?" 93 percent of the active youth and 73 percent of the inactive youth said yes—this, when no main-line congregations reported having a youth minister. The only professional youth leaders (aside from pastors) found in these 188 randomly selected congregations were directors of Christian education—and only 3 percent of the congregations were found to have had such professional help.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Parachurch professionals***

During this same period—the 1940s and '50s—leaders of parachurch groups began appearing on the scene.

- **Young Life.** Jim Rayburn launched Young Life in 1941 as a leader-centered and evangelism-focused youth approach. Having just graduated from seminary, Rayburn shaped his approach to young people while serving as a seminarian youth minister at Gainesville (Texas) Presbyterian Church from 1938 until 1941. As youth evangelist he had become chiefly interested in reaching those untouched by any knowledge of Christ—"those youth that

stayed carefully and stubbornly away from churches."<sup>16</sup> By 1964 there were over 400 of his Young Life clubs in existence.<sup>17</sup>

- **Youth for Christ.** Jack Hamilton was this organization's first full-time leader. Starting in 1946, the high-energy Hamilton reported 700 clubs that had been established by 1951.<sup>18</sup> When a study's disconcerting results showed that the very people the organization claimed to reach were remaining outside the program's influence, a shift in philosophy of ministry was introduced and with it a change in name: Campus Life.
- **Youth With a Mission.** Founded by Loren Cunningham in 1960, YWAM soon had 5,000 short-term missionaries and 887 North American full-time personnel overseas, operating out of 90 centers established as separate corporations. Young people were not the target of this mission, but its evangelists.<sup>19</sup>

These and other parachurch clubs—such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes—differed radically from church-oriented groups in the nature of their leadership: instead of being served by pastors and congregational lay adults, the parachurch organizations or clubs depended on leaders whom the organization itself trained and sent out.

The exact figures of those who served in the early years as full-time workers with youth are not available because careful records were not kept. But we do know that by 1970 Youth for Christ and Young Life organizations each employed over 1,000 staff members.<sup>20</sup> When staffs of several other parachurch organizations are added, one finds the numbers mounting impressively.

## The beginnings of a struggling youth profession

The Third Baptist Church of St. Louis gives us the earliest record of a full-time youth minister. In 1937 this church had decided they needed a youth worker to serve them full-time.<sup>21</sup>

From the mid-1950s to around 1970, the position of "youth pastor" was becoming established as an important member of the pastoral staff in evangelical churches. Churches typically employed laypersons to work with groups of high school students. And since no real training was available, many of these youth leaders simply imitated what they had seen happening in parachurch club programs.<sup>22</sup>

By 1980 there were around a thousand ministers of youth serving in Southern Baptist congregations. When other professional church staff members who had youth ministry assignments in their job description were included, the figure swelled to over 8000 men and women in youth

ministry-related staff positions by 1980. No other denomination came close in terms of numbers involved in youth ministry.<sup>23</sup>

Within the Roman Catholic Church the position of youth ministry represents the newest professional ministry. When a national study was made in 1990 of parishes randomly selected from all 13 National Catholic Conference Bishops regions, a small but significant sample of youth ministers appeared in the sample:

- Half were young men whose future in the ministry seemed to be very limited.
- Nearly half were thirty years old or younger.
- Nearly 85 percent were under forty years old.
- Nearly two-thirds were single.
- 85 percent were college graduates; a third had master's degrees.<sup>24</sup>

With the blossoming of youth ministry as a profession from the 1960s through the 1990s, colleges and seminaries encouraged the trend with course offerings. (The first known full-time “professor of youth education” was Phillip Harris, hired in 1949 at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>25</sup>) Yet it's been only during the last two decades that most church colleges and seminaries have become serious about equipping these youth workers for their daunting task. Most have had to learn through trial and error. Veteran and highly successful youth minister Doug Fields remembers well how unprepared he was for his first years as a youth minister.

**During my first years in youth ministry, I remember standing in front of junior high students and basking in their looks of anticipation. I was young, fun, energetic, and well liked. The faces said, *This is going to be good.***

**But only a few years later, when things weren't going as well, I saw a different look—one that said, *This better be good.* Because I lacked knowledge and skills, I thought the students didn't like me anymore. Their enthusiasm waned, attendance dropped, volunteers found other church ministries to which they could devote their time, and our programs changed every time I spied on another youth ministry. Parents as well as church elders questioned what was happening, and I accepted all the problems as my fault.**

**I constantly looked over my shoulder to see if other people were thinking what I was thinking—**

**that maybe I wasn't the right person for youth ministry despite my having the necessary goods.**

**Even though I worked exhausting hours, the job wasn't getting done the way everyone seemed to want. Previously unspoken expectations surfaced, and they fueled my workaholic personality to fix everything, even though I couldn't specifically identify the problems. My desire for doing ministry had long moved from pleasing God to appeasing people. I wanted to be liked by everyone.<sup>26</sup>**

### **Discontent, rapid turnover, and this study**

Fields makes it abundantly clear how easily youth workers, untrained and discouraged, would find the task too demanding and leave the profession. This oft observed fact has led to a much quoted but unsubstantiated statistic: the tenure of the average youth minister on a particular job is a year and a half or less. I know of no study that establishes that statistic. Someone must have made an estimate based on personal observation—and being a person of some authority, has been quoted ad infinitum.

A similar concern—about church pastors who leave the ministry—caused the United Church for Homeland Ministries in 1970 to commission a national study of ex-pastors. Its purpose was to determine why these pastors left the ministry. Their large and careful study found that no more than one percent of their clergy drops out each year. In other words, their denomination was not facing a dropout crisis. Instead of a runaway epidemic, they were facing a persistent low-grade infection.<sup>27</sup>

Yet there are distinct differences between the pressures faced by senior ministers and youth ministers. The pressure to succeed is especially acute for youth ministers, who—despite their lack of knowledge, skills, and experience—are expected to attract young adolescents to a life of commitment to Christ and the church. It is a daunting task made increasingly difficult by the expectations of adults and a notable lack of congregational support.

Such differences in the natures of parish ministers (or senior pastors) and youth ministers result in widely contrasting perceptions of their work, made particularly evident in a national study conducted by Murnion for the National Catholic Conference of Bishops in 1992. This report shows that the vast majority of parish ministers find their ministry very satisfying (93 percent), that it gives them a sense of accomplishment (92 percent), and that it is spiritually rewarding (91 percent).<sup>28</sup> These high percentages indicate an overwhelming affirmation of pleasure in serving as parish ministers.

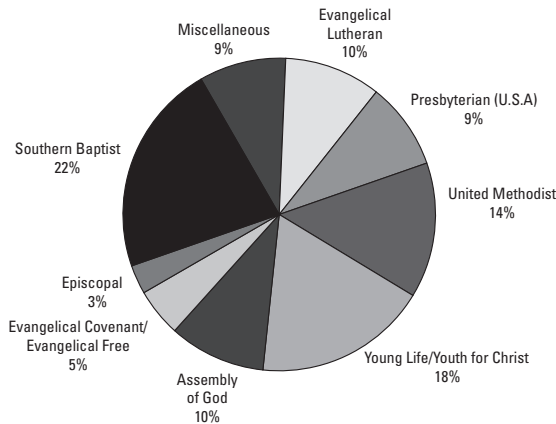
The same report, however, tells a very different story about how *youth ministers* in the same church evaluate their work. Here is a summary of what the researchers found to be true for this newest profession in the Roman Catholic Church.

**Of the various ministry positions, youth ministers seem to derive the least satisfaction and support. The full-time youth ministers find ministry the least affirming, their coworkers the least affirming, their supervisors the least satisfied, parishioners the least satisfied, and youth ministers the least likely to encourage others to enter parish ministry.<sup>29</sup>**

***How many flee the ministry?  
Turnover among youth ministers***

If every denomination had a similar report of its professional youth ministries, one would have to say that the profession is in trouble. At this time, however, far too little is known about basic career issues; factors such as job satisfaction, effectiveness, and longevity beg for information in order to alter the perceived high turnover in personnel.

What is the turnover rate now among youth ministers? We do not really know. But our sample of 2,416 youth ministers shows that there is a much longer tenure for the average youth minister than has been assumed (see figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1—Number of years in youth ministry**

What we don't know is how these percentages would change if the 48 percent from our study who were nonrespondents had participated in

our study. It is reasonable to suppose that a disproportionate number of these also would be disconcerted and discouraged. Indeed, the fact they did not participate in our survey may well reinforce the fact that they were feeling overwhelmed by their jobs and consequently were not ready customers for a survey requiring another hour of their time. Still, we have before us a fairly stable picture of tenure for youth ministers in eight denominations and two parachurch groups. Most have weathered the initial storm of learning how to conduct a youth ministry and are making a career for themselves.

### **Troubling concerns of youth ministers**

Yet what are the pressures inherent in this career? What troubles or concerns do youth ministers face that can eventually drive them out of the profession? These are the questions that fueled this study, which gave considerable attention to professional dilemmas faced by youth ministers. As explained in the previous chapter, our study was conducted in 1996 at the Youth Leadership Conference in Atlanta (“Atlanta 96: Youth Leaders United for Spiritual Awakening”), where 7,500 youth ministers from all over the country assembled at the Georgia Dome for the largest gathering of youth ministers to date. A sample of these was secured—2,130 full-time youth ministers from dozens of denominations and parachurch organizations representing a wide range of age, geography, and experience filled out a sentence-completion questionnaire consisting of 20 item stems. An item stem, in this case, is the supplied part of an open-ended research question, like the examples listed below. These are five of the 20 items included in the questionnaire—

- What I like best about youth ministry is...
- My biggest obstacle to an effective youth ministry is...
- My biggest concern today in youth ministry is...
- It pleases me in youth ministry when...
- What discourages me most about my youth ministry is...

Their 20 fill-in answers were carefully tabulated to gain significant information from youth ministers serving in all parts of the country. Their written comments identified concerns such as the following:

- Administration allows me too little time to be with my youth.
- I am bothered by the lack of respect given me in my job.
- My lack of training in counseling limits my effectiveness.
- It’s a struggle to balance my youth ministry job and personal life.
- My biggest obstacle to effective youth ministry is myself.

These responses gave us a good idea of the concerns most troubling to youth ministers today. They identified the range and universe of gritty issues that characterize this profession. The written responses supplied the grist we needed for developing the items needed in our national study. (Note: A summary report of the Sentence Completion responses can be found at Link Institute's Web site, [www.linkinstitute.com](http://www.linkinstitute.com).)

With the participants' responses in hand, it became our purpose to discover how extensive these concerns are and to identify the people particularly troubled by each major concern. Our study revealed 12 distinct concerns that pressure today's youth ministers. Six of these (discussed in Chapter 2) are created by adults and youth in congregations they serve. The other six concerns—(discussed in chapter 3) possible outcomes of the first six that relate to the personal life of the youth minister—are inner feelings that eventually lead to burnout.

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### THINK IT OVER, TALK IT THROUGH

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1. What are the features in the history of youth ministry that have contributed to its present state?
2. If you were to contribute a sidebar to this chapter offering your own experiences in youth ministry as a "slice of history," what would you highlight?
3. What do *you* think the greatest concerns are troubling youth ministers today? (Don't peek ahead!)
4. What's been most influential in the historical development of youth ministry for your particular denomination/organization?

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