



Youth Ministry 3.0: A Manifesto of Where We've Been, Where We Are, and Where We Need to Go

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THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Have you ever had a vision for a perfect day of adventure and found that the reality didn't even come close? I experienced this in an acute manner in Mendoza, Argentina, in the fall of 2006.

I was in Mendoza for one of Youth Specialties' Spanish youth worker conventions (called the *Convención Internacional Liderazgo Juvenil*). On the Sunday afternoon of the event, I had a bunch of free time. So two friends and I decided to find an adventure. We talked to a woman working at a tourist kiosk about getting tickets for a car race happening just outside of town. But she informed us the event was sold out and suggested we take a winery tour on bicycles.

Mendoza is the Napa Valley of Argentina, and it's peppered with hundreds of wineries. Though a winery tour on bikes sounded a bit too *Mary Poppins*-ish for us guys, we didn't have a lot of other options. And we thought it might be just weird enough to create some fun moments and memories.

The woman gave us instructions, maps, and bus passes; and off we went, confident in our expectation of a perfect day.

After riding a municipal bus for about 45 minutes—and constantly wondering if we'd missed it—we finally reached our stop. Hopping off, we found ourselves in a dusty, industrial estate on the edge of town. It was completely non-scenic and

non-touristy, but we were headed toward another tourist kiosk—one with the bikes.

Except it was closed.

At this point we had our first angel encounter of the day: An older, heavysset Argentine woman carrying way too many grocery bags walked up and engaged us in a sort of mime/charades conversation. (We didn't speak Spanish; she didn't speak English.)

She mimed, "Are you fine-looking gentlemen trying to find bicycles to rent?"

We expertly mimed our response, "Yes!"

The angelic woman pointed down the road to a cheery banner and said, "*Bicicletas.*" Even with my D in high school Spanish, I knew enough to understand that one.

With renewed vigor, we set off in the direction of this private bike-rental facility. As it turned out, it was really a cinderblock enclosure containing a rabid dog on a chain, a small house, and six bikes in the kitchen. But we paid our money and got our bikes before heading out with (once again) revitalized excitement for what lay ahead.

I can honestly say that for the first 100 or 200 yards, I was thinking to myself, *This is fantastic! What a weird and wonderful thing to do! We're going to have a blast!*

But shortly thereafter I started to feel the first twinges of pain. I saw that my back tire was low on air. I noticed there was a horrible headwind blowing against any forward progress. And now I could feel my heart racing and my leg muscles getting all noodly.

After about a mile, I told my friends I had to stop and rest for a bit. After another half mile, we stopped a second time. The third stop was a quarter mile later. And the fourth was a few hundred feet past the third stop.

Two things occurred at this point:

First, I started to seriously consider whether or not I would die—that day—while on the side of the road in rural Argentina.

Second, one of my “friends” whipped out his camera phone and shot a mean little video of me panting, gasping, and clutching my chest. (Thankfully, since this is a book, I have no way of showing it to you.¹)

I had to concede; I had to go back. So we rode back to the “rental facility” only to find the front gate closed and no one home. Jimmying open the gate, we were soon met by the now-unchained rabid dog. We quickly discovered that throwing our bikes at the dog slowed him down just long enough for us to get back outside the gate and close it behind us. Rabies narrowly avoided.

I’ll condense this next part: We walked, hopped on various buses, sat on rocks and logs, tried to hitchhike—and all in the general direction we thought we were supposed to go. Eventually, we were completely lost and making up imaginary headlines: “Stupid Gringos Disappear Outside Mendoza; Authorities Wonder Why They Were Riding Bikes.”

Then it appeared. (Insert angel choir sound here.) Walking along a small tree-lined lane, we came across what could best be described as a rural Argentine 7-Eleven. And—get this—it was called “Emmanuel,” which, of course, means “God with us.”

We decided this God-with-us store would be our winery tour today. Exhausted, we purchased beverages and sat at a picnic table out front, laughing at our misfortune and stupidity. Three semi-toothless guys at the next table laughed at and with us.

So we started the mime game with them, somehow explaining where we’d been trying to go. They explained the winery

was just around the corner, and we begged them to shuttle us there on their little moped. Explaining why this was not possible, they pointed to me, pretended to sit on an imaginary moped, then squatted low, indicating that my “size” would bring doom to their transportation.

Eventually, we convinced them to take the other guys on the moped (I had to walk), and we got to the winery...just as it was closing.

Our Efforts Aren't Meeting Our Expectations

For most of us who've been doing youth ministry for a while (and some who haven't been doing youth ministry for a while),

I believe there's a sense of this story: The reality that's playing out is somewhat different than what we imagined, hoped, or expected.

We, as the church, somehow, some way, need to develop an authentic community so individuals hunger for it and realize that nothing else will feed that hunger.

—*Jeff Greathouse*

The difficulty with changing and evolving our methods is that it often takes two to three years before we'll know for sure if our shift was a great new direction or a wrong turn. Mutations, morphs, and evolution involve lots of little changes over time, and sadly most youth workers don't have the patience for that. —*Lukefish*

While there's wonderful stuff happening in youth ministry all over the place—in pretty much every youth ministry—our impact, the transformation of kids' lives, seems less than we'd hoped. Study after study is bringing this harsh reality into focus. Kids are dropping out of church after youth group at staggering rates² (as high as 50 to 70 percent in one reputable survey³). And those students *in* our youth groups

seem to be—according to researchers—subscribing to a faith that's neutered and unsustainable.⁴



To be fair, we youth workers are doing what we've always done—trying to love teenagers to the best of our abilities and help them experience the love of God. Our hearts are right (for the most part), but—I believe—there are flaws in many of our assumptions and methods. A disconnect.

Some of these flaws exist because we wrongly adopted cultural priorities into our youth ministry thinking. But more often our flaws exist because while our thinking was correct—for its time—the world of teenagers has changed, and we've been slow in our response.

It's like this: When you're in a poor, rural country and see a horse-drawn wagon rolling down a dirt road, you think nothing of it. It fits. But when you're driving through Pennsylvania Dutch country and see a horse-drawn buggy rolling down a nice, paved road and holding up traffic, it seems as though something doesn't fit. In many ways youth ministry today is the latter horse-drawn buggy.

Kenda Creasy Dean, in *Practicing Passion*, indicates that what teens are looking for is a faith worth dying for—something so important that it's worth giving one's life to completely. As far as I've seen it, our current models of ministry are largely failing to present faith in such a light. Instead it's a fun place to be with your friends—come for the food, stay for the Bible.

And maybe this is a greater symptom of, not youth ministry, but the family. If parents and mentors outside of youth ministry have the greatest impact on students' faith, this makes me think that youth ministry is just spinning its wheels—trying the wrong cure for the disease. Maybe what Youth Ministry 3.0 means is focusing on the family as a collection of interdependent people, not simply focusing on teens as individuals without regard to other influences in their lives. If nothing else, this means it's misguided to think that the “drop-out rate” is solely the fault of youth ministry. Maybe the greater fault is the failure to parent our children well. —*dan*

For all the talk of change and “if only we...” I find that often the best answers are the same as in the past: Not the extreme-game aspect...or the truth chair...but the idea of incarnational living among students. I cannot see that ever changing. —*Brandon*

Our Past, Present, and Future

Some time ago, a consultant working with our leadership team at Youth Specialties introduced us to a timeline exercise. (Interestingly, he's also one of the "friends" who was with me on that horrible day in Argentina.) He placed three pieces of paper on the floor; on each piece a word was printed, creating a physical timeline: PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE. We each took turns standing on the pieces of paper, moving between them, and thinking about our lives, and where we're headed.

Recently I worked with the board of a nonprofit organization struggling with its identity. I used this same timeline exercise, but I had board members step into past, present, and future as an embodiment of the organization. I'd like to take a pass at that with this book: Looking back at our past, looking at our present, and attempting to describe a preferred future.

I'm not looking into a crystal ball—and this isn't an exercise in *predicting* the future. Instead, I'm hoping to describe what I'm seeing and experiencing and feeling about where we need to go so we can continue being true to our calling.

Running into a Hole in the Ground

As I write this, there's a series of Wendy's TV commercials that show ordinary people—often guys—wearing red braids and having countercultural epiphanies about burgers and other fast-food realities. My favorite of these commercials opens with an aerial shot of a massive hole in the ground, and hundreds of people are running toward it from all sides. When they get to the hole, they all jump in.

Then the shot changes to catch the face of one guy (wearing the red Wendy's wig) who's running amid the crowd. As he's

running, we can hear his thoughts as he realizes that something isn't right. He then starts to speak as it dawns on him that he doesn't have to have his burgers cooked ahead of time and kept warm under a heat lamp. He slows to a stop, and a few others also stop to listen—but while most of the crowd continues to run into the hole. The few who stop with him all decide that they want their burgers to sizzle! They cheer and start running back—against the flow of the crowd.⁵

It's a funny commercial. But I have to admit that every time I see it, it reminds me of the church in North America. We have all this momentum. We perceive things are going well. Our megachurches are more mega than ever. Our youth ministries are better funded than ever. Youth ministry is receiving more respect than ever. We have better resources and training events and celebrities and credibility than we've ever had.

So why does it seem like we're racing into a hole?

I want to be part of that countercultural band of youth workers who stop. I want to be part of that “wait a second” group that doesn't accept the way things are. I want to join with others who notice that we're heading down a path toward obsolescence and complete ineffectiveness and turn around to ask, “What should we change?”