

I have been working on a Master of Arts degree at Southwestern Assemblies of God University. For one of my writing assignments I chose to examine the church's retention rate of youth people when they graduate from high school.

Because of your interest in youth ministry, I wanted to send you a copy of this paper. As you read this paper keep the following in focus:

1. This was written for an academic assignment and is still in that format.
2. My purpose is to not be critical of youth ministry or the Assemblies of God youth ministry. I have given twenty-five years of my ministry to youth ministry. I saw a problem that I believed needed to be addressed. As an Assemblies of God minister statistical data was readily available. The loss rate in Assemblies of God youth ministries is typical of other denominations.
3. The suggested solutions are not exhaustive, but I do believe they are areas that can make a tremendous difference.

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# **An Examination of the Church's Loss of High School Graduates and What Can Be Done to Improve the Retention Rate**

By Cecil Culbreth © July 15, 2002

Ministry to youth has been a part of the church since its inception. Jesus took time to bless the children and demonstrate their importance to the kingdom. Throughout church history youth have been a part of the ministry of the local church. However, the rise of the professional youth worker in the local church is a fairly recent development. It would be difficult to select an exact date, but the professional religious youth worker in the local church started after the 1950's. During the last forty years youth ministry has experienced tremendous growth. However, since the growth rates for the average evangelical church in America have been extremely small during the last decade, the question is raised about the long-term impact that youth ministry should have on a person. Statistical data from the Assemblies of God churches was examined to determine if the growth in youth ministry produced longer-term growth in the church.

The Assemblies of God youth ministries attendance for a ten-year period was examined. Their decadal growth rate for youth ministry for ages 12-18 from 1992 to 2001 was 18.5%. While church growth experts would not classify that rate of growth as outstanding growth, it was growth. However, during the same period the growth rate in the Assemblies of God for ages 19-29 declined by 10.7%.<sup>1</sup> That would seem to indicate

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<sup>1</sup> "Annual Church Ministries Report Youth Statistics Summary" (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God), 2.

that the students that are being reached by the youth ministry are not being reached for the long-term. Some may counter that the reason there was a decline is that the average Assemblies of God church does not have an adequate ministry to college age students and young adults. While that may be true, it does not fully explain the drastic decline that takes place after graduation from high school. In 1992 there were approximately 289,785 students age 12-18 involved in Assemblies of God youth ministries. Ten years later all those students would be in the 19-29-age bracket. However, in that age bracket there were only 65,286 involved in Assemblies of God churches in 2001.<sup>2</sup> That indicates that the Assemblies of God lost over 77% of their teenagers from the church after they graduated from high school during that ten-year period. It must be pointed out that the number of students in the 12-18-age category covers only a seven-year span while the 19-29-age category covers an eleven-year span. So it is possible that the loss rate is actually higher than 77%.

Chi Alpha, the Assemblies of God college ministry, experienced a 40% decadal growth rate during the same period. (See Appendix A) However, it must be pointed out that in 2001 there were only 9,792 students involved in Chi Alpha. Dennis Gaylor, National Chi Alpha Director, indicated that over two thirds of the students involved in Chi Alpha do not come from an Assemblies of God background.<sup>3</sup> This would seem to indicate that the growth in Chi Alpha has come from reaching non-Christian students rather than an influx of Assemblies of God students. It also means that only 10% of the Assemblies of God college students who are attending non-Assemblies of God colleges are involved in Chi Alpha. (Appendix A) There is insufficient data to determine when the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Gaylor, to Cecil Culbreth, 28, June 2002, Annual Census Report, National Chi Alpha Office, Springfield, MO.

students actually left the church, but based upon the lack of participation in the Assemblies of God Chi Alpha ministry it seems probable that the majority of the loss takes place soon after graduation from high school.

None of this information is intended to be critical of any ministry. However, it does indicate that the students from youth ministry are not getting involved with the college ministry and are leaving the church. This problem is not limited to the Assemblies of God but seems to cross many denominational lines. Will Willimon commented, "In my denomination, it's almost like we passed a law that, if you're under 35, you cannot be a United Methodist. It is one factor we haven't mentioned: our woeful inability as mainline Protestants to retain our young."<sup>4</sup> George Barna did research among Christian teens and discovered that leaving the church was on their mind long before graduation from high school. Only about one-third of the teenagers say they are likely to continue to attend a Christian church in the future when they are independent.<sup>5</sup> Barna's research among Christian teenagers seems to indicate that the dropout rate given for the Assemblies of God during one ten-year period may be close to being the actual loss rate.

In light of this information the fault for losing so many students when they graduate from high school cannot be placed totally on the church's lack of ministry opportunities for college age students. The Search Institute did extensive research on the status of Christian education in the church and the status of personal faith within the church. Four conclusions were drawn from that study. First, United States Christians do not have mature faith. Second, Christian education is the most important vehicle

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<sup>4</sup> Will Willimon, "The Spirit Hasn't Left the Mainline" Christianity Today, 11 August 1997, electronic.

<sup>5</sup> George Barna, Real Teens (Ventura: CA., Regal Books, 2001), 113.

within congregational life for helping people grow in their faith. Third, despite its potential impact, most congregations don't have effective Christian education. Fourth, concrete changes in churches can improve educational effectiveness and help people grow in faith.<sup>6</sup>

The conclusions from that study help explain why the church loses so many teenagers when they graduate from high school. It is possible that the students never matured in their faith. Students may leave the church because they have not developed a life-long relationship with Jesus. Is it possible that students have not been taught that their relationship with Jesus should be for life? Chap Clark, an associate professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, offers some insight into this problem when he states, "Traditionally, senior high youth ministry has been more concerned with getting kids to make an individual decision to follow Christ than where they go from there. As noble as this goal is, in many cases it has led to a generation of youth ministry 'orphans'—involved youth group kids who, when they leave the nurture and family of their youth program, have no safe place to live out their faith."<sup>7</sup>

This paper will briefly explore some of the probable causes for why teenagers leave the church. The paper will suggest three essential characteristics of a local church youth ministry that are necessary to help students build life-long relationships with Jesus Christ which will ultimately improve the retention rate.

Mark DeVries, in commenting on his own youth program, indicated that his program had succeeded in leading youth to become a mature Christian teenager, but

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, The Teaching Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Chap Clark, "Strategic Assimilation," Youthworker (July/August 2002) : 23.

had somehow failed to place youth on the track toward mature Christian adulthood.<sup>8</sup> DeVries believes that the constant push to make the Christian faith non-boring to teens may actually be what causes teens to leave the church before they become adults. He states, “When young people grow up to be reactive Christian adults, they are constantly waiting for someone or something to attract them, to involve them, to impress them.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently youth ministries spend too much effort trying to impress teenagers rather than to develop them.

Ben Patterson observed, “It is a sad fact of life that often the stronger the youth program in the church, and the more deeply the young people of the church identify with it, the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they grow too old for the youth program.”<sup>10</sup> Patterson does not identify what he means by a strong youth program. But in many circles strong is synonymous with big. Many churches endeavor to build a youth ministry more on hype than spiritual health. Doug Fields, youth pastor at Saddleback community church states, “When a church values hype, there is little need for spiritual leadership. A non-Christian could become a ‘successful’ youth worker at that kind of church by increasing activities, launching new ideas, and boosting attendance.”<sup>11</sup>

Some would try to blame the lack of retention of graduates on the culture or on the mindset of postmodernism. However, Dan Kimball, the pastor of a church designed for the postmodern, believes that is not the problem. He states, “Postmodernity may be the greatest thing that has happened to youth ministry. The youth culture landscape

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<sup>8</sup> Mark DeVries, Family-Based Youth Ministry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Patterson, “The Plan for Youth Ministry Reformation,” Youthworker (Fall 1984) : 60.

<sup>11</sup> Doug Fields, Purpose Driven Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 28.

today is similar to what Paul faced in Acts 17. The potential for evangelism is incredible.”<sup>12</sup>

It may be impractical to try to pinpoint the exact reasons students leave the church after graduation from high school. However, there is one observation that can be made—youth ministries have apparently failed to help teenagers develop a life-long relationship with Jesus. Doug Fields shared an incident from his youth ministry that taught him a valuable lesson. He had an encounter with a former student that been involved at the highest level in the youth ministry, but as an adult the former youth group member was living in complete opposition to the ways of God. Fields states, “I eventually realized that we had designed a youth ministry that encouraged committed students to become faithful to our programs or to their discipler more than they were committed to Christ and following his way.”<sup>13</sup> The goal of any youth ministry should be to enable students to develop a life-long relationship with Jesus Christ. This type of relationship will help improve the church’s retention rate.

For that to happen the youth ministry must first be relationship oriented. As Michael Clarensau and Clancy Hayes states, “At the heart of youth ministry, relationship must permeate all you do with students if your are to have significant influence on their spiritual lives.”<sup>14</sup> Jesus said, “Go and make disciples.” (Matthew 28:19 NIV) While some youth ministries view discipleship as taking students through a manual, discipleship must be viewed as preparation for a life-long relationship with Jesus Christ. As Doug Fields learned it is not enough just to get students to commit to a discipleship

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Jones, Postmodern Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Fields, 156-157.

<sup>14</sup> Michael H. Clarensau and Clancy P. Hayes, Give Them What They Want (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 15.

program during their youth years—they must make a commitment to Christ that will last into their adult years.

In looking at the ministry of Christ, it is evident that He prepared His disciples for a life-long relationship in a time frame of only three years. Apparently Jesus did something right in training His followers. Jesus was a discipler. Sylvia Collinson defines the discipling method of Jesus as, “An intentional largely informal, learning activity in which two or a small group of individuals, typically in a community holding to the same religious beliefs, make a voluntary commitment to each other to form a close, personal relationship for an extended period of time, to enable the disciples to learn from the other.”<sup>15</sup> She advocates a discipleship ministry that follows the pattern of Jesus. However, others such as Lawrence Richards believe that the discipling methods of Jesus “cannot and must not be adopted by the church”.<sup>16</sup>

Richard's rationale for rejecting Jesus' methods is faulty. He overlooks the fact that Jesus commanded His disciples to make disciples. (Matthew 28:19) Collinson sees another oversight on Richard's part, “It seems illogical for Jesus to use a method of preparing his disciples for a similar teaching ministry if he had no intention that they would follow his example.”<sup>17</sup> An examination of the discipling method of Jesus indicates that Jesus discipled out of relationships. His command was always, “follow me”. Jesus told his disciples to “Follow me”, not do you accept me as your personal savior. Youth ministry that will be effective for the long-term is relational. Mark Lamport states, “One

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Collinson, “Making Disciples: An Educational Strategy For Use Beyond the Time of Jesus?,” *Journal of Christian Education* (December 2000) : 8.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, “The Disappearing Disciple: Why is the Use of ‘Disciple’ limited to the Gospels and Acts.” *Evangelical Journal* (Spring 1992) : 9.

<sup>17</sup> Collinson, 8.

of the first lessons anyone learns about effective youth ministry is the pivotal nature of socialization in shepherding people in the Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup>

Jewish theologian Joshua Heschel observed, “What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but *text-people*. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the students read; the text they will never forget.”<sup>19</sup> Pam Fickenscher expresses a similar thought when she says, “Many twentieth-century evangelism efforts were based on the assumption that non-Christians needed to overcome a resistance to belief itself.”<sup>20</sup> However, the obstacle to faith is not unbelief for this generation, it is seeing how that faith is lived in the life of another person. Fickenscher believes that the first step in the evangelism process is to build relationships. She states, “Most Xers have grown up in an atmosphere where cultural pluralism is a daily reality. In order to demonstrate the truth of the gospel to an Gen Xer, you need not have all the answers, but you must be prepared to be a companion, a friend.”<sup>21</sup>

If youth ministries want students to have a life-long relationship with Jesus, those students must have a mature believer who is building a relationship with them and who models Christian behavior. Because of time limitations the average youth pastor will be limited to ten to twenty youth with which he or she can build strong relationships using the methodology of Jesus. While a youth pastor can direct a youth service with literally hundreds of teenagers present, that does not mean those teenagers develop a life-long relationship with Jesus. As Richard Barnes and Allen Jackson state in speaking to

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<sup>18</sup> Mark A. Lamport, “What is Youth Ministry?,” Christian Education Journal (Spring, 1996) : 64.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Education,” Jewish Education (Fall 1953) : 19; quoted in Marvin R. Wilson, Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 280.

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Lee Schieber and Ann Terman Olson, ed., What Next?: Connecting Your Ministry with the Generation Formerly Known as X (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 72.

youth leaders and teachers, ““The most teaching moments usually lie outside the 60-minute block of time set aside for the Bible study session. Youth tend to adjust their beliefs and behavior—positively and negatively—by what they observe in others, including you.”<sup>22</sup>

Jesus was effective as a teacher because He modeled and taught the type of behavior that He wanted to see in His followers. This has strong implications for youth leaders. John Dettoni gives several reasons why the youth leader is important. First, the youth worker is a model of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. “What the youth worker is, is what the youth will be.”<sup>23</sup> Second, the youth leader will determine what the youth will become. “The expectations youth workers have for their youth will lead eventually to some sort of reality in the lives of the youth.”<sup>24</sup> Third, the youth leader is a source of stability for the youth. The youth worker must be a mature adult who can still walk with the young person on their journey during the teen years.

Youth desire meaningful relationships with others. The youth worker must take what some call the “incarnational” approach to youth ministry. As Dettoni says, “The adult youth worker is fully adult but also can participate with youth as one *with* them, though not *of* them.”<sup>25</sup> Edward Trimmer also advocates a relational approach to youth ministry. He believes this would include not only the relationship between the youth worker and the youth; but between the youth and God; youth and their world—family and other youth; youth and their church.<sup>26</sup> Doug Fields speaks strongly to youth leaders

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Barnes and Allen Jackson, Teaching Youth: Leaders, Lessons, and Lifestyles (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>23</sup> John M. Dettoni, Introduction to Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Edward A. Trimmer, Youth Ministry Handbook (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 40-41.

in this area when he states, “The students in your youth ministry don’t need your clever ideas and great programming skills. They need a living model—a man or woman of God who is passionate about his or her faith.”<sup>27</sup> A youth worker who is passionate about his or her faith will help students build a life-long relationship with Jesus.

A second essential characteristic of a youth ministry that will help students build life-long relationships with Jesus is—it must be ministry oriented rather than event oriented. This is the pattern that the Apostle Paul gave to the early church. He states, “It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV) The youth ministry must prepare teenagers for the work of the ministry not only to follow the biblical pattern, but so that they can be truly like Christ.

The youth leader must ask the question, Is the goal to appeal to students or is it to minister to students so they in turn can minister? DeVries states, “If we simply try to *appeal* to teens by making worship easier or more entertaining, we may end up tacitly teaching them that their role in worship is to be passive spectators.”<sup>28</sup> In order for the youth ministry to be ministry oriented there is a necessity to understand the importance of the biblical and theological roots for ministry. Kenda Dean states, “Youth ministry has been notoriously reluctant to claim its theological roots, and most mainline churches

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<sup>27</sup> Fields, 38.

<sup>28</sup> DeVries, 178.

have given up being a hotbed of any kind where teenagers are concerned.”<sup>29</sup> Youth ministries that want students to develop life-long relationships with Jesus must make the Word of God the focus of their ministry. The Bible is unchanging yet dynamic. The message of God’s Word can speak to any culture and any generation. Mark Ashton states, “The most serious weakness in the Christian church’s outreach to teenagers today is not our failure to understand our culture. It is a failure to take the Bible sufficiently seriously.”<sup>30</sup>

Kenda Dean believes that if a youth ministry is going to have any long lasting impact on twenty-first-century teens it must be oriented “unapologetically toward the cross.”<sup>31</sup> She believes the cross of Christ is crucial to adolescents precisely because it shows the extent to which God goes in order to save them. She goes on to say, “If the quest for salvation is fundamental to being human and not just to being sixteen, then youth ministry’s contribution to the twenty-first century church may be its unapologetic witness to the salvific relationship available in Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Youth ministry needs to embrace its biblical and theological roots. Doug Pagitt states, “Today’s students are among the most spiritual the nation has known and yet the church is trying to use ‘secular bait’ to reach them. Students want to see religious, spiritual people who are useful in our world.”<sup>33</sup> This is why Tony Jones believes that “Our primary responsibility is to build Christ-centered community among the students in our ministries.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, “Proclaiming Salvation: Youth Ministry for the Twenty-First Century Church,” *Theology Today* (January 2000) : 527.

<sup>30</sup> Ashton, Mark and Phil Moon, *Christian Youthwork* (Eastbourne, England: Monarch,1995), 55.

<sup>31</sup> Dean, “Proclaiming Salvation: Youth Ministry for the Twenty-First Century Church,” 534.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 536.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, 87.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

However, it is critical for the youth minister to understand that the teen's decision to accept Christ is just the starting point of the journey for the student. The goal is a life-long relationship with Jesus that enables the student to be a functioning member of the body of Christ. The youth minister needs to understand that Christ-centered community has a purpose that reaches beyond itself. As Dean states, "The church must also help teenagers recognize that salvation has come to them, and that as a result God calls them to leave behind their schoolboy or slave girl egos and take on new identities as disciples, empowered for ministry through the practices of Christian faith."<sup>35</sup>

Jesus did not do everything for His disciples. He trained them, taught them, modeled ministry and behavior, but He also pushed them into ministry. Jesus said, "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." (Matthew 10:7-8 NIV) Trimmer observes, "Effective youth ministry has usually meant that adults are 'doing' the ministry to youth. However, youth ministry is much more than doing something to youth. It is also ministry with youth."<sup>36</sup> Trimmer also suggests that youth ministry is accomplished by youth. Youth can do the work of the ministry.

Youth ministry should focus on preparing students for life-long ministry. This is perhaps the greatest weakness in the average youth ministry program. Mark DeVries states, "If we train our youth to expect entertainment from church, we can be assured that when things get a little slow, they will be switching the channel to somebody else's

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<sup>35</sup> Dean, "Proclaiming Salvation: Youth Ministry for the Twenty-First Century Church," 538.

<sup>36</sup> Trimmer, 21.

show.”<sup>37</sup> Yet the average youth pastor spends large amounts of time trying to come up with creative ways to keep the teenager’s attention during the course of the youth service. This philosophy obviously hinders youth from developing life-long relationships with Jesus Christ. DeVries states, “When drawing teens through exciting programs becomes the goal of a youth ministry, we are in danger of teaching them that the Christian life will always be a party.”<sup>38</sup> This helps explain why such large numbers of youth are exiting the church when they graduate from high school and do not return. DeVries makes an interesting observation when he states, “Young people who develop a low tolerance for boredom will be unable to practice the disciplines necessary to grow in the Christian life.”<sup>39</sup>

Some youth workers may feel that they must “entertain” the students in order to attract them to the youth service. Neil Howe and William Strauss have done extensive research on youth issues. Their book, *Generations*, written a decade ago predicted many of the youth trends that are happening today. Their recent book, *Millennials Rising*, shows that the millennial teens are defying conventional wisdom about youth. In regards to church they say, “At church, today’s teens can get bored and turned off when modern services get too casual, too MTV-style. They are pulled in a new direction.”<sup>40</sup> If that is true it may be time to rethink the way a youth service is conducted. It also would indicate the mindset of the teenager is more open to making the teenager ministry focused.

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<sup>37</sup> DeVries, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>40</sup> New Howe and William Strauss, Millennials Rising: The Next Generation (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 236-237.

The youth leader must focus the youth ministry outside the facilities of the local church. The youth leader must view the students in the youth ministry as ministers or missionaries. As Andy Hickford states, "It is clear from the Bible that adolescence is not a time when spiritual things need to slow down or in some way be put on hold. In fact, it is exactly the opposite."<sup>41</sup> There is ample evidence in the Bible that the youthful years are clearly ones of both access and achievement in the things of God. Joseph, Samson, Josiah, Daniel and David are just a few examples of young people that were greatly used by God to accomplish His purposes.

In view of this the youth leader must prepare his or her students to be effective ministers or missionaries in their world. The youth leader must understand that his or her primary function is to prepare the Christian students within the ministry to be evangelists to their peers. Doug Fields believes that growth does not take place because of evangelistic programs but because of evangelistic students.<sup>42</sup> Fields believes that evangelism is one of the weakest areas in the average youth ministry. He believes that most youth ministries would get a D+ on evangelism.<sup>43</sup>

Fields recognizes that a church program cannot compete with the world, but he does state, "We do have life-changing content (the truth of God's Word) and caring relationships with which the world can't compete. This *truth* is what I want our students to understand. I want them to take some personal responsibility for evangelism and live their lives with eyes that are searching and hearts that are beating with compassion for

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<sup>41</sup> Andy Hickford, "What is a Theology of Youth Ministry?," Christian Education Journal (Spring 1996) : 43.

<sup>42</sup> Fields, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 50.

their lost friends.”<sup>44</sup> The youth leader plays a major role in evangelism happening through the students.

First, students must see evangelism modeled in their youth leader—because that will be the sign of an evangelistic attitude. Second, students must also be regularly challenged to become evangelistic. Third, the youth leader must help structure evangelism situations for their students. Mark Senter III, who has been recognized for his extensive research on the history of youth ministry, states, “A survey of the history of youth ministry shows that the evangelization of high school students, if left to peers, will never get done. Adults have consistently had to structure situations, train student evangelists, and hold the young people accountable to do the job.”<sup>45</sup> Young people will not have a lasting impact on their peers without the support of their church. The youth program must be ministry focused—that is preparing the students for ministry.

Some youth leaders are reluctant to challenge their students to be evangelists to their peers. But Doug Fields thinks differently. He states, “I told the students that if we didn’t grow we were sending a message to our non-Christian friends to go to hell.”<sup>46</sup> A number of denominations and parachurch ministries have recognized that the junior high and high school campus is the most strategic place to reach students today. Nationally, 89% of all students attend public schools. That represents over twenty million young people that attend secondary public schools.<sup>47</sup> It is obvious that a large number of young people spend a great amount of time on the public school campus. It is a strategic place for student-to-student evangelism.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Senter III, The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992), 177.

<sup>46</sup> Fields, 110.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: Digest of Education Statistics 1999, (Washington: GPO, 2000), 53-55.

The cultural climate is ripe for evangelism. Tony Jones states, “Postmodernism is not the evil that some Christian thinkers make it out to be. No longer are we beholden to the scientific proof model of evangelism—everything does not need to be explained and rationalized.”<sup>48</sup> Jones goes on to state, “There is new room in our faith for experience, for mysticism, and for mystery.”<sup>49</sup> Instead of the youth leader trying to reach students on the campus, Christian students must be trained and equipped to reach their peers. Students are missionaries. They have their tribes and subcultures decoded. They’re the ones learning to translate culture.<sup>50</sup>

A number of ministries have adopted the strategy of enlisting students to be missionaries to their campus. Youth Alive, a national campus ministry, gives the following definition of a campus missionary, “A campus missionary commits to pray, live, tell, serve, and give to take the gospel to his or her peers.”<sup>51</sup> These students are challenged to select five non-Christian friends on their campus for the focus of their evangelism efforts. George Barna’s research indicates that the typical teen claims to have just five really close friends.<sup>52</sup> The five-friend focus is obviously a strategy that fits the behavior patterns of the average teenager. It is also a step toward making the youth group ministry focused.

There are some important things the youth leader must do to make this ministry focus effective. As Barry St. Clair states, “For God to work on a campus, youth workers must commit to sacrificial prayer.”<sup>53</sup> St. Clair also suggests that youth leaders must put

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<sup>48</sup> Jones, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.,39.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy Williams, Sharla Moody and Loralie Crabtree, eds., Campus Ministry Playbook (Springfield, MO: Youth Alive, 2002), 110.

<sup>52</sup> Barna, Real Teens, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Barry St. Clair and Keith Naylor, Penetrating the Campus (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 38.

themselves in situations that give them exposure to the school. This could be done by going to school events, looking at the yearbook, interviewing teachers, read the school newspaper, visit youth hangouts, interview students, and serve a need.<sup>54</sup>

The youth leader also prepares the students for ministry on the campus. They need to be taught to pray for their friends. Dennis McLuen tries to give his students the proper mindset. He states, “There are many ways to reach your unsaved friends at school for Jesus Christ. You just have to realize that deep down inside, all of your friends want to know God intimately. Because of the relationship you have built with them over the years, many of your friends—who would never set foot inside a church—would be happy to listen to what you have to say about Christ.”<sup>55</sup> Placing students in permanent ministry situations will increase the possibility of those students developing a life-long relationship with Jesus and improve the retention rate.

The third essential characteristic, and perhaps the most radical one for the youth ministry that desires to help students develop life-long relationships with Jesus is—the ministry must be intergenerational. Edward Trimmer states, “The most neglected area of youth ministry over the past twenty years is relational ministry. Congregations need to develop and educate a cadre of adults who are willing to spend time and develop meaningful relationships with teens.”<sup>56</sup> While there is no data to prove it, the possibility exists that the rise of the professional youth worker has caused some adults to feel they are not needed in youth ministry.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 55-62.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis “Tiger” McLuen and Chuck Wysong, The Student Leadership Training Manual for Youth Workers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 147.

<sup>56</sup> Trimmer, 58.

Intergenerational ministry to youth is not new. It is the pattern established by God for ministry to youth and children. “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NIV) This pattern worked for the education of Hebrew children. Terry McGonigal expresses the idea that it worked because kids participated with adults in life together, and in the process they grow in the knowledge and appreciation of God’s love, as well as God’s claim upon their lives.<sup>57</sup> Even today, research indicates that this pattern is the most effective pattern in ministry to youth. George Barna’s research among teens shows that 78% of teens say their parents have “a lot” of influence on how they act and think.<sup>58</sup> Barna states, “No other individual or people group came close to having that degree of perceived influence.”<sup>59</sup>

Other studies indicate this same concept. Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson conducted extensive research into today’s adolescents. As a result of their research they wrote, “What parents consider important for an adolescent do to—whether it is getting good grades, taking challenging courses, or apply to a competitive college—builds an orientation toward the future. In families where these messages are clearly and consistently communicated through family discussions and parental actions,

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<sup>57</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and David Rahn, eds., Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 127.

<sup>58</sup> Barna, Real Teens, 72.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 72

adolescents are more likely to share their parents' sense of what is important."<sup>60</sup> This information has many implications for the church's youth ministry, particularly as it relates to the involvement of parents. Yet, the average youth ministry has a tendency to remove the parents from the youth ministry.

Age segregation is not only a problem in the church; it also affects society as a whole. Psychologist Mary Pipher writing in the *USA Weekend* edition states, "A great deal of America's social sickness comes from age segregation. If 10-14 year-olds are grouped together, they will form a *Lord of the Flies* culture with its competitiveness and meanness. But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them all. For our own mental and societal health, we need to reconnect the age groups."<sup>61</sup> Patricia Hersch, a former contributing editor of *Psychology Today*, stated, "American Society has left its children behind as the cost of progress in the workplace. This isn't about working parents, right or wrong, but an issue for society to set its priorities and to pay attention to its young in the same way it pays attention to its income."<sup>62</sup> In reporting in *Time Magazine* on the school shooting that took place in Conyers, Georgia, John Cloud stated, "There is surely some connection between the fact that parents spend 40% less time with their kids now than thirty years ago and the violence that some of them commit."<sup>63</sup> The church should pursue intergenerational ministry in order to enhance the positive impact on teenagers.

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<sup>60</sup> Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 147.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Pipher, "The New Generation Gap," *USA Weekend*, 21 March 1999, electronic.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 19.

<sup>63</sup> John Cloud, "Just a Routine School Shooting," *Time Magazine*, 31 May 1999, 38.

The involvement of parents will help the long-term impact of the youth ministry on the lives of the teenagers.

Allan Harkness suggest three primary reasons why the church should pursue intergenerational ministry. First, biblical theology demands it. He believes intergenerational ministry is seen in both the Old and New Testaments. Second, personal spiritual formation requires it. Third, society is searching for it.<sup>64</sup> Julie Gorman understands the benefit of intergenerational ministry. She states, “The formation of the person in Christ is not autonomous. It is the community, both historical and present, that forms the network of relatedness and support for security in risking transformation. It is the community that also gives opportunity for expression of the character being formed.”<sup>65</sup>

This generation has a mammoth longing for connection and relationships. Paula Rinehart references Barak and Rachel Dretzin Goodman, the husband-and-wife team who documented the story on teenage sex in Conyers. They were interviewed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. “The Goodman’s said that during the year they spent talking with teens, they were repeatedly struck with the widespread loneliness present in teenagers—the longing for meaning and connection, especially from parents.”<sup>66</sup> Teens want some intergenerational relationships to help bring security and stability into their lives.

The Search Institute conducted an intensive study on Christian Education in the local church. Eugene Roehlkepartain wrote a review of that research, he states, “Not

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<sup>64</sup> Alan G. Harkness, “Intergenerational Education for an Intergenerational Church?”, Religious Education (Fall 1998) : 431.

<sup>65</sup> Jule Gorman, “Christian Formation,” Christian Education Journal (Winter 1990), 69.

<sup>66</sup> Paula Rinehart, “Losing our Promiscuity” Christianity Today 10 July 2000, electronic database.

surprisingly, the *Effective Christian Education* study found that parental involvement in program decisions and planning has a measurable impact on a youth education program.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, how involved are parents and adults in the average local church youth ministry? Kenda Dean states, “Adolescents today grow up with less adult contact than any generation in human history, forcing teenagers into what journalist Patricia Hersch aptly describes as a ‘tribe apart’.”<sup>68</sup>

This lack of adult involvement in youth ministry has been compounded by adults who are involved but do not understand their proper role. Paul Miller makes an interesting observation, “Research has found that the values of young people closely parallel those of their parents. Churches use programming to segregate youth from mainstream activities not so much because youth want as little as possible to do with adults, but because adults want as little as possible to do with youth.”<sup>69</sup> Trimmer mentions another problem area, “A significant problem for youth ministry has been the number of adults who want so much to be accepted and liked by teens that they forget they are adults and behave like teens.”<sup>70</sup> A person can be a friend of teens without having to be one of them or act like them. While intergenerational involvement is essential, it is imperative to select the right kind of adults to be involved in the youth ministry.

Trimmer suggests four qualities to look for in selecting those adults. First, these adults need to have a faith to share. They should be mature believers who are alive, vibrant and full of hope. Second, they enjoy being with youth. Trimmer states, “Those

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<sup>67</sup> Roehlkepartain, 93.

<sup>68</sup> Dean, “Proclaiming Salvation: Youth Ministry for the Twenty-First Century Church,” 533.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Miller, “Don’t Start a Youth Group,” The Christian Ministry (May/June 1998) : 24.

<sup>70</sup> Trimmer, 57.

adults who enjoy young people have a deep respect and value for who youth are as persons.”<sup>71</sup> Third, they need an appropriate sense of calling. The adults need to understand they are involved in youth ministry for the students, not to help themselves. Fourth, time availability. Trimmer states, “The adults who are in youth ministry must have time to develop relationships and spend time with youth. This may mean freeing these adults from other responsibilities at the church.”<sup>72</sup> The church will have to make some changes in their thinking and their programming to have an effective intergenerational ministry.

Intergenerational youth ministry is about helping students develop life-long relationships with Jesus Christ. As Donald Griggs states, “Christian education is more than learning Bible stories, doctrine, and all else that contributes to one’s faith heritage. Effective Christian education involves people of mature faith nurturing others who are growing in faith.”<sup>73</sup> As Eugene Roehlkepartain states this intergenerational contact “Is more likely to bring young people in contact with adult mentors with mature faith. It builds for the young people a sense of community in the congregation. It can build mutual respect among the generations. It is also a way to build shared experiences with youth and parents.”<sup>74</sup>

For some churches intergenerational youth ministry will be a paradigm shift. Their youth ministries are just the opposite. As DeVries observes, “For many teenagers, the place they are the most segregated from the world of adults is their

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 64.  
<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 64-67.  
<sup>73</sup> Roehlkepartain, 11.  
<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 145.

church.”<sup>75</sup> Teenagers are an integral part of the body of Christ. If part of the body is always isolated, it will die. DeVries suggests, “Whatever new models for youth ministry we develop must take seriously the fact that teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood as they are connected to the total body of Christ, not isolated from it.”<sup>76</sup> Intergenerational ministry is not just another model that a youth ministry can select. It is not a model, but a foundation that a youth ministry needs to insure long-term impact. As Mark DeVries states, “Regardless of the model, every ministry must find ways to build on a foundation of parents providing intentional Christian nurture for their children and students connecting to an extended Christian family of faith-full adults.”<sup>77</sup>

DeVries raises a question, “Could it be that one of the reasons for the Western nations’ devastating divorce rate is that our young people are not learning the skills of genuine love? Young people learn to love through the long haul as they are surrounded by adults who, over and over again, demonstrate this kind of enduring, long-suffering love.”<sup>78</sup> Intergenerational youth ministry can provide that type of loving environment.

DeVries examined his own youth ministry at which he was the youth pastor. His findings are interesting. “Almost without exception, those young people who are growing in their faith as adults were teenagers who fit into one of two categories: either (1) they came from families where Christian growth was modeled in at least one of their parents, or (2) they had developed such significant connections with adults within the church it had become an extended family for them.”<sup>79</sup> He also observes that how often they attended youth events including discipleship groups was not a good predictor of which

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<sup>75</sup> DeVries, 41.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>77</sup> Dean, Clark, and Rahn, eds., 152.

<sup>78</sup> DeVries, 50.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 63.

teens would grow toward Christian adulthood. His experience is similar to the experience of Doug Fields that was cited earlier in the paper.

Any youth ministry that is not intergenerational in nature should seriously consider the benefits that loving, caring and properly trained adults can bring to the lives of the students. If the goal is to help the student develop a life-long relationship to Christ, then adults must be brought into the youth ministry. DeVries observes, “The young people who are fortified with significant relationships with adults are consistently the ones who are able to resist involvement in negative behaviors.”<sup>80</sup>

Research done at the University of California at San Francisco sought to determine why some young people are destroyed by the deficits of their home environment while others seem to thrive under the same set of circumstances. Earl Palmer reviewed those studies and uncovered one constant factor among the teens that stayed strong, “They all experienced the non-exploitive interest, care and support of at least one adult during their childhood years—a parent or grandparent, uncle or aunt, older brother or sister, coach or teacher, pastor or youth leader—an adult with no hidden agenda or exploitive design on the youngster.”<sup>81</sup> Intergenerational youth ministry is a structure that enables the youth ministry to provide that type of support to teenagers.

This research has strong implications for the Christian youth ministry. As DeVries states, “The Christian faith becomes real to most teenagers not because of rational arguments for Christianity or because they try like crazy to hang on to what they believe, but because real people live out the gospel in what may seem to be very

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>81</sup> Earl Palmer, “Perspective,” Youthworker (Spring 1992) : 4.

insignificant ways.”<sup>82</sup> DeVries believes that if youth pastors try to appeal to teens by making worship easier or more entertaining, they may end up teaching them that their role in worship is a spectator.<sup>83</sup> The appeal needs to be a loving role model that demonstrates to the students what it means to have a life-long relationship with Jesus.

The average church Christian education activities and programs are segregated by ages. This constant segregation may work against the goal of developing Christ-like students. DeVries states, “This arrangement is efficient for the church but in the long run it may rob young people of much needed opportunities to learn with adult Christians.”<sup>84</sup> Adults often complain about the negative influence of music and television on the lives of teens. However, DeVries makes an interesting observation when he states, “It is only when the church and family abandon their role of helping young people navigate that passage to adulthood, that teenagers look to their friends, their music, and the media as surrogate mentors.”<sup>85</sup>

Mark Senter III, who has done extensive research on the history of youth ministry, speaks of the changes that have taken place in youth ministry, particularly as it relates to the youth minister. He believes that there is need for a paradigm shift in the role of the youth minister. He states, “The most promising innovation in the profession, however, will come when the youth minister begins to see him or herself as the servant of the lay volunteers. The new breed of youth workers will be trainers, coaches,

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<sup>82</sup> DeVries, 169.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>85</sup> Dean, Clark, and Rahn, eds., 147.

disciplers, and equippers of adults with gifts to work with youth.”<sup>86</sup> This is intergenerational youth ministry in action.

The church may want to experiment with providing teens short-term learning opportunities with adults as a way to re-introduce intergenerational ministry. This type of approach will not only prove beneficial for the teenagers, it will also prove to be beneficial for the adults. It would not only increase the understanding of the adults into the challenges that youth are facing, it would give the adults an opportunity to learn from the teens. Jesus taught that adults needed to become like a child to enter the kingdom. (Matthew 18:2-4)

In order for an intergenerational ministry to be effective, the youth minister must understand that the priority is to train and equip parents to minister to their kids. The youth minister should be as concerned about helping the parent, as he or she is the kid in the youth ministry. The youth minister should also train other adults to serve as spiritual parents to students whose parents may not be Christians. As Richard Barnes and Allen Jackson state, “The major frontier for teaching youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is ‘family responsibility’ through partnering with parents and other family members.”<sup>87</sup>

Walt Mueller believes there are four key elements to raising spiritually healthy kids. First, parents must model and teach wholehearted and single-minded devotion to God. Second, parents must understand the cultural forces shaping the heart and head of their kids. Third, the approach to parenting must be biblical, realistic, preventive, redemptive and prayerful. Fourth, parents must give unconditional love, time, attention,

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<sup>86</sup> Senter III, 185.

<sup>87</sup> Barnes and Jackson, 99-100.

boundaries, discipline, listening ears, honesty and a spiritual heritage.<sup>88</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed outline on how to assist parents, Mueller's suggestions could provide a framework for training parents and adults to be a part of intergenerational ministry.

Doug Fields believes the youth minister must create a teamwork mentality in order to facilitate an intergenerational ministry. He states, "Parents must be viewed as partners in ministry. The youth worker must recognize his or her limited role in the life of a student."<sup>89</sup> DeVries offers two suggestions: (1) empower parents; (2) equip the extended family of the church.<sup>90</sup> Equipping the extended church family addresses the issue of how to provide intergenerational ministry to those students whose parents are not in church, live in a single parent home or come from divorce situations. The average youth minister may feel that he or she cannot get enough workers to do the ministry now, much less to start an intergenerational ministry.

However, it is possible to recruit adults for this type of ministry if it is approached properly. Another benefit is that it would provide for adults the opportunity to be involved in ministry as well following the ministry pattern already discussed in Ephesians 4:11. One of the first steps to getting more adults involved in youth ministry is to shatter the existing stereotypes of personalities that make good youth leaders. Doug Fields believes that if you simplify the serving opportunities the potential for youth leaders is increased. "Everyone in your church is a potential youth worker if you provide serving opportunities that are more simplified and less threatening than working directly

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<sup>88</sup> Walt Mueller, Understanding Today's Youth Culture (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1994 and 1999), 380-392.

<sup>89</sup> Fields, 253.

<sup>90</sup> DeVries, 66-68.

with students.”<sup>91</sup> Fields suggests several levels of involvement—the cheerleading team—these are the ones who show support for the youth ministry or one of its leaders. The resource team is made up of people who share their possessions or specialized abilities. The prayer team supports with their prayers. The hands on team works directly with and cares for students.<sup>92</sup> This approach would be a good beginning for intergenerational youth ministry. However, keep in focus that the ultimate goal is to involve the adults in the lives of the teenagers.

The involvement of adults in intergenerational youth ministry will mean their role is changed from the typical chaperone or sponsor to the role of a shepherd. Richard Barnes and Allen Jackson suggest that, “Caring adults agree to shepherd small groups of teenagers so that youth ministers and pastors and volunteer youth coordinators can deal with big-picture problems.”<sup>93</sup>

This goal is accomplished by getting other adults involved in the youth ministry. Extended families must be built for the teenagers. DeVries states, “An extended Christian family is a community of believers who affirm and encourage growth toward Christian maturity. Teenagers need adults who can help provide a consistent, lifelong structure of Christian maturity.”<sup>94</sup>

The campus missionary program is a great place to involve adults in intergenerational ministry. These adults can meet on a regular basis with the campus missionaries to prayer with them, encourage them, share testimonies of what God is doing on the campus and provide accountability for the missionary. The youth minister

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<sup>91</sup> Fields, 277.  
<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 277-279.  
<sup>93</sup> Barnes and Jackson, 18.  
<sup>94</sup> DeVries, 116.

may want to start a special Sunday School class just for campus missionaries and their adult coaches. This would not only provide intergenerational ministry for a strategic group within the youth ministry, it could also prove to be a tremendous benefit to the campus missionary program in the local church.

Barnes and Jackson discuss eight mistakes to avoid in youth ministry planning as it relates to families.<sup>95</sup> Their ideas could help lay the groundwork for intergenerational ministry in a local church. First, consider family time and needs when scheduling youth events. Second, assist the parents instead of trying to be the parent. Third, make parents look good. Fourth, keep parents informed and don't do it the day before a big event. Fifth, encourage and offer support for families. Sixth, support the parents' judgment or authority. Seventh, include families in youth events. Eighth, work hard to connect teenagers with the extended church family. If the youth minister will pursue those simple things, he or she can start laying the groundwork for an intergenerational youth ministry.

It should be evident that intergenerational ministry will be of benefit to students in helping them developing life-long relationships with Jesus. Greg Johnson and Mike Yorkey did a study of Christian adults to determine the most effective faith-nurturing practices for parents. There was a single faith-nurturing factor that was present in over 90 percent of those surveyed. They state, "While we didn't come up with a sure-fire formula, one thing was obvious: those who stuck with their faith, had a half-dozen

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<sup>95</sup> Barnes and Jackson, 49-52.

mentors present during their growing up years.”<sup>96</sup> Intergenerational ministry helped the students develop a life-long relationship with Jesus.

In conclusion, it should be obvious that the church has a problem in the retention of students after they graduate from the youth ministry. There are several factors that may have contributed to that problem. However, the most obvious one is that students have not been properly developed to see their relationship with Jesus as life-long. Youth ministries must begin to focus on the long-range goal—helping students develop a life-long relationship with Jesus. First, it is recommended that the youth ministry be relational in nature. This is the pattern that Jesus gave and is the pattern that is most effective in ministering to people. Second, the youth ministry should be ministry focused rather than event focused. The youth minister’s role is to train, equip, motivate and provide ministry opportunities for the students and those adults that are working with him or her in the youth ministry.

Third, the youth ministry must become intergenerational. Parents and other gifted adults must be brought into the youth ministry. These adults can be shepherds, small group leaders, Sunday school teachers and spiritual parents while all of them fulfill the purpose of being a positive role model to students. As the leadership of the church evaluates their youth ministry and makes the necessary changes they must remember the goal—helping students to develop a life-long relationship with Jesus.

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<sup>96</sup> Greg Johnson and Mike Yorkey, Faithful Parents, Faithful Kids (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 249.

## **Appendix A**

### Chi Alpha

The decadal growth rate for Chi Alpha was calculated on estimated attendance in 1992 of 4,797 and with estimated attendance in 2001 of 6,732. In 1994 Chi Alpha added another category to their census that allowed them to calculate involvement. In 2001 the total involvement in Chi Alpha was 9,792. The growth rate of Chi Alpha since 1994 using the involvement figures is 68.5%. Since there were no involvement numbers available for 1992 the attendance figure was used to calculate the decadal growth rate.

However, to calculate the percentage of Assemblies of God students involved in Chi Alpha, the involvement census number of 9,792 was used since the numbers reported on the Annual Church Ministries Report are generally involvement numbers and not average attendance.

The Annual Church Ministries Report for 1999 indicated that there were 32,413 Assemblies of God students attending non-Assemblies of God colleges. Out of the 9,792 students involved in Chi Alpha, approximately 3,260 of those students were from Assemblies of God churches.

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