

YOUTH
MINISTRY
IN THE 21ST
CENTURY

FIVE VIEWS

Chap Clark, Editor


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Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: Why This Book? xi
Introducing the Authors xix

VIEW ONE: **Greg Stier**

The Gospel Advancing View of Youth Ministry 3
Responses to the Gospel Advancing View 17
Brian Cosby + Chap Clark + Fernando
Arzola + Ron Hunter + Greg Stier's Response

VIEW TWO: **Brian Cosby**

The Reformed View of Youth Ministry 37
Responses to the Reformed View 53
Greg Stier + Chap Clark + Fernando Arzola + Ron
Hunter + Brian Cosby's Response

VIEW THREE: **Chap Clark**

The Adoption View of Youth Ministry 73
Responses to the Adoption View 91
Greg Stier + Brian Cosby + Fernando
Arzola + Ron Hunter + Chap Clark's Response

VIEW FOUR: Fernando Arzola

The Ecclesial View of Youth Ministry 113

Responses to the Ecclesial View 125

Greg Stier + Brian Cosby + Chap Clark + Ron
Hunter + Fernando Arzola's Response**VIEW FIVE: Ron Hunter**

The D6 View of Youth Ministry 147

Responses to the D6 View 163

Greg Stier + Brian Cosby + Chap Clark + Fernando
Arzola + Ron Hunter's Response

Afterword: Where from Here? 179

Notes 181

Index 191

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Introduction

Why This Book?

[Jesus] matters because of what he brought and what he still brings to *ordinary* human beings, living their ordinary lives and coping daily with the surroundings. He promises wholeness for their lives. In sharing our weakness he gives us strength and imparts through his companionship a life that has the quality of eternity.

He comes where we are, and he brings us the life we hunger for. . . . To be the light of life, and to deliver God's life to women and men where they are and as they are, is the secret of the enduring relevance of Jesus.

—Dallas Willard,
The Divine Conspiracy

Oh, that we would, that we could, pass excitement for Jesus on to our kids.

—Comment by a father following a
parent meeting on lifelong faith

In 2001 I had the chance to join three other youth ministry leaders to come together to debate in the book *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's Mark H. Senter III, the editor; Southwestern Baptist's Wesley Black; and Malan Nel, from South Africa. We were invited to define and defend one of four ways of looking at youth

ministry, write a brief critique of the other three, and finally have one last word in response to the critiques. The four positions were

inclusive congregational (Nel), where a church “thoroughly integrates its adolescents”;
preparatory (Black), seeing youth ministry as preparing “disciples in training”;
strategic (Senter), youth ministry as a church-planting strategy; and
missional (Clark), where the emphasis is to focus on evangelism as the primary goal of the ministry.

The initial idea for the book came from an original editor who had asked a couple of us to participate, assigned us the chapters, and instructed us to each do the best job we could to make a distinctive argument in favor of our “view.” As the project took shape, the driving theme became to make sure that the boundaries of the view itself framed the central idea, and that the objective was to draw people into debate and ultimately conversation so as to help them to build a comprehensive and integrated model of doing youth ministry. As I subtly noted in the book, the artificial nature of the need for each author to avoid nuance but to make a strong, solid case for his view made for an interesting textbook and dialogue starter but was also somewhat difficult in that each of us occasionally felt overly boxed in regarding what we had written. I, for one, do generally believe in what I wrote about the “missional view of youth ministry,” but not without much qualification.

The book has sold well, and continues to do so to this day. I still hear stories of *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church* being a helpful resource for churches, and it even remains a textbook in many college and seminary classrooms. I am grateful for the conversation this book has stirred for the past decade and a half, and I am both proud and honored to have been a part of it.

Why Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views?

As youth ministry has continued to move forward since 2001, with greater emphasis on the many complex issues kids and churches face—like family and parent ministry, dealing with serious crisis and youth at risk, social justice, gender and sexuality, implementing a “practical theology,” and missional evangelism—the need for a new conversation has emerged. It is not that the four views themselves have gone away but that the game has changed a great deal since then, and the bar is much higher for us who work with and care for kids in God’s name than at any time in recent memory.

It seems to me that what we do not need at this time in youth ministry history is a few more generic models to kick around, to debate their merits, and then set out to create our own contextual way of going about our business. Today in the church, and especially in youth ministry, we are being forced by society and by real people to go deeper and to find more stable theological footing for not only what and how we do our work but also why we do it and where it fits into God's plan for the entire church. Today around the world we are more global, more economically and technologically connected, and arguably more actively invested in the plight of the oppressed, abused, and broken than ever before. At the same time, as a group, Christians have never been under more intellectual attack or more publicly disregarded than we are today. We are also less trusted and considered less relevant than we have been in decades, if not centuries. The rise of the "nones" in United States census data confirms what popular culture has been telling us for several years: that to many of our neighbors, we as a "religious bloc" are at core culturally backward, ignorant, bigoted, and far more concerned with our own agenda and self-protection than we are with even the basic tenets of Jesus. Adding to this societal stereotype, young adults and adolescents are leaving our ranks, and those who still express some level of faith have been described by researchers as having such a shallow understanding of their faith that, as a group, they are "moralistic therapeutic deists."¹ They are also more stressed, and have more expressed struggles, than any generation in recent memory.²

Today's youth ministry is in desperate need of a theological, psychosocial, and ecological grounding. We need a fresh trajectory, a new idea. While certainly there are lots of powerful and meaningful ministries, churches, and organizations making a significant impact on the lives of teenagers, there is also a darker underbelly to how difficult it is to maintain the glow of the early years of youth ministry. Few dispute the reality of lengthened adolescence—whether we refer to the newly minted "emerging adult" as a fourth developmental stage (that place between adolescence and adulthood) or believe that adolescence itself is simply extending, in many cases well into the thirties and beyond—the developmental reality of what it means to be a teenager has dramatically changed in the last thirty years. Even the brain MRI studies confirm two things that affect the future of youth ministry: it takes ten years or more today for the adolescent brain to fully develop its adult capacity, and the speed at which it does so is directly linked to the amount and quality of attachments a child/adolescent experiences (which in most cases today are far less than in years gone by).³ The days of hiring a superstar "youth pastor" and enlisting a few volunteers to run a "quality" youth ministry program on the relational fringe of a church and expecting measurable enthusiasm for a

lifelong commitment to Christ and the faith community, much less observable spiritual transformation, have been fading for years if not decades. The larger the church (or organization) and/or the larger the budget, the more capacity for producing the kind of programs that, at least initially, attract kids and demonstrate what looks like health and depth. The evidence, however, is that because even this “success” is located in the developmental center point of an adolescent’s journey to maturity, many if not most of them will still need something beyond youth ministry to enable them to find their way to lifelong, mature faith.

Thus this book, which is an attempt to bring together five voices who, while perhaps not representative of all of the major themes in contemporary youth ministry, bring a fundamental way of thinking when it comes to grounding the church’s calling to the young. *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century* differs from *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church* in our concern not to present a few distinct models of “doing” youth ministry. The authors in this book do not so much advocate for a theoretically distinct model, as helpful as that approach in the original book is; rather, they advocate for their own convictions and perspectives on what ministry to adolescents essentially is. Our desire is to offer five relatively unique voices and perspectives on the *basics* and *foundation* of what youth ministry should be about now and in the coming decades. Each author brings years of commitment, writing, leadership, and sponsorship to his perspective. None is asked to soften his perspective or write up his take in such a way as to make for a clean, distinctive, and clear dialogical framework. Each believes that when push comes to shove, his position is preferable and perhaps even simply correct. That is the beauty and the risk of this adventure.

One more point that must be acknowledged at the outset of this project is that the authors do not represent the wide diversity of people who serve the kingdom of God in youth ministry, especially in terms of gender, race, and theological tradition. We know that there are many others who have important and distinct voices and perspectives on these and other positions discussed, and they deserve to be heard. The editorial decision, however, came down to the uniqueness of each of the authors and the followers they represent. Each author has a long, reputable, and, most important, well-known leadership ministry that is reflected in his viewpoint and a global reputation that sets him apart. For the purposes of this book, our hope is that the reader will take this book for what it is, knowing that we realize this is a weakness.

Another and similar point is in answer to the question, Why weren’t other popular authors and ministry influencers—in some cases far more well-known, like Kara Powell and Doug Fields—asked to participate? The issue related to

choosing the authors of this book had to do with how their views represent a theoretical, and theological, foundation on which youth ministry strategy and practice could flow. Kara Powell, my close friend and long-term colleague at Fuller Theological Seminary, is not only one of the recently recognized “Most Influential Women” by *Christianity Today* but, as the executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute, is also a gifted and prolific author and speaker. Her writing and work, however, at least in the last few years, has focused less on a detailed description of the theological foundations of youth ministry than on the essential elements of what it means for a Christian community to nurture lifelong faith in adolescents, primarily through the *Sticky Faith* body of work.⁴ Kara and her team, of which I am a part, work with and represent the faculty members at Fuller’s three schools who research and study family and youth issues—everything from youth at risk to urban trauma to the leadership realities affecting congregational change. This is all extremely valuable and helpful work for the church and parachurch. For the purposes of this book, Fuller Youth Institute’s work could be a useful resource and strategy to any of the views expressed.

Doug Fields, arguably the prototypical youth ministry leader who has had the greatest influence on the field, is also noticeably absent (as are so many others too numerous to mention).⁵ *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* is one of the most comprehensive books on youth ministry programming ever written. It is based on the theological premise that there are five “purposes” of the church, and therefore of youth ministry, and that we must then structure our programs to fulfill those purposes. It can be argued that many if not most people who actually employ *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (PDYM) use it as less of a *theology* of ministry than a *structural philosophy* of how to do Christian ministry. PDYM (and other related materials) is, without a doubt, the cleanest, most easily applicable and direct manual on putting together a youth ministry program. For our purposes in *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century*, however, we were looking for emerging foundational assumptions that would drive the implementation of PDYM or *Sticky Faith*.

There is no doubt that in terms of their contribution to youth ministry, both *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* and *Sticky Faith* have changed the way youth ministry is strategized. The beauty of both of these authors, books, and programs is their flexibility (thus the multiple languages they have been translated into). Any one of our five views can easily use either of these books and strategies to create a program and implement it. Perhaps a way to consider the difference is to see PDYM and *Sticky Faith* as containers or shells, or an operating system within which different foundational philosophical and theological systems can work like different programs on a phone or

tablet. Almost anyone who has a solid handle on what they want to pass on (the discipleship classes in PDYM, for example, or parent training in *Sticky Faith*) and who has staff and a church willing to incarnate themselves with kids can be greatly helped by either. So a Pentecostal, a Roman Catholic, one of Brian Cosby's "orthodox Reformed" followers (see his chapter), student leadership devotees, and even communities that aren't Christian can and are using PDYM and *Sticky Faith*. Thus we have chosen to focus on those perspectives that were so foundational that they could fit either of these strategies.

Getting the Most Out of *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century*

Our hope is that you will engage the perspectives and issues raised here to examine more deeply what youth ministry is in your context and what it should be. Our intent is to give you a clear and compelling apologetic for each of our views and to defend their basic tenets even as we attempt to respond to and at times "correct" one another. This idea is not to stake our claims in such a way that we would enlist followers to walk with us in lock step but rather to engage the conversation regarding where the church needs to go in the future concerning our love for and ministry to the young in the future. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that you may forge your own way by combining one, two, or several of the views into your theological map.

We also hope you engage this book in a group. We as authors are convinced that our best work is done when we collaborate, push against others, and work to integrate insights that the Lord may wish to sharpen through our willingness to listen and speak to one another. We believe that is true for every person, especially for those in leadership.

We have added a web-based element to this journey as well. Baker Academic, in partnership with Fuller Theological Seminary, has created a website dedicated to this book, www.youthministry.fuller.edu. This site will not be limited to this book but will also include the forthcoming *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* and other books and topics that move us to think differently about youth ministry. In addition, the website will offer several videos related to *21st Century Youth Ministry: Five Views* as well as other youth ministry topics.

So grab a few friends and hash out the pros and cons of each view. Argue (kindly) as you formulate your own viewpoint. And allow yourself to be critical not just of our words but of your own convictions, assumptions, and history. Perhaps out of this churches and organizations will grow in how they think about ministry as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. This

is our overall goal. And perhaps also more kids will know that Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God are their calling and vocation and that the body of Christ is the family that God has given to them as they grow in his likeness for his sake and glory. That is, at the end of the day, the reason for all of this. We thank you for joining in on the conversation.

Introducing the Authors

Five authors, five views of youth ministry in the twenty-first century. In order not to give preference to any author, as editor (Chap Clark) I made the decision to not put our articles in alphabetical order, because I would be first. I then thought maybe we would go with the first name, but for such an illustrious group of leaders that seemed a bit too informal. I finally decided to go the biblical route and cast lots (or actually, to draw out of a hat!). Thus the authors listed here are not in alphabetical order, but in order of the articles they have written.

Greg Stier is founder and president of Dare 2 Share Ministries, a ministry that equips teenagers to share their faith relationally. Greg has spoken to and trained over a million teens and youth leaders in the last twenty years. A former pastor, church planter, and youth leader, Greg is the author of fifteen books. He has been married to his wife, Debbie, for twenty-two years. They have two children.

Brian Cosby (PhD, Australian College of Theology) is the author of a number of books, including *Giving Up Gimmicks: Reclaiming Youth Ministry from an Entertainment Culture* and *Rebels Rescued: A Student's Guide to Reformed Theology*. He has served in youth ministry for over a decade and currently pastors Wayside Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Signal Mountain, Tennessee.

Chap Clark (PhD, University of Denver) is professor and chair of Youth, Family, and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. Chap was on the Young Life Staff for fifteen years, has been a senior pastor, was the vice provost at Fuller for several years, served as senior editor for *Youthworker Journal* for

eight years, and is president of ParenTeen, a nonprofit organization that provides parenting, culture, and family seminars and consulting. He has written or coauthored over twenty books. He has been married for thirty-five years to Dee. They have three grown children and live in Gig Harbor, Washington.

Fernando Arzola (PhD, Fordham University) is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and associate professor of religion at Nyack College. He is the author of *Evangelical Christian Education: Mid-Twentieth-Century Foundational Texts*; *Exploring Worship: Catholic, Evangelical and Orthodox Perspectives*; and *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry: Theory and Praxis in Urban Context*; and coauthor of *Foundations for Excellence*. He founded the Urban Family Empowerment Center, a holistic community center in the Bronx. He is married to Jill and has a college-age daughter, Nicole.

Ron Hunter is the executive director and CEO of Randall House and the publisher of D6 Curriculum, and serves as the D6 Conference Director. He regularly speaks at various conferences and consults for ministry and business organizations. Ron has written numerous articles for various Christian magazines and coauthored *Toy Box Leadership*. He graduated from Welch College and earned his MPA from the University of Colorado, and is in his final stages of earning his PhD from Dallas Baptist University. He married his college sweetheart, Pamela, and they have two children in college, Michael and Lauren.