

# YOUTH MINISTRY AND THE CHURCH IN TEN YEARS

by Richard Ross

*Editor's note: This message was one of several futuristic glimpses presented in May 2006 at the Youth Ministry Executive Council meeting in Washington, DC. YMEC is a group convened by NNYM each year to encourage national youth ministries to interact, pray and build relationships toward greater cooperation.*

**T**he experience of sitting in a church service may be quite different in ten years:

- The digital devices in almost every pocket will provide easy access to most human thought that can be expressed in words.
- The complete digitization of major libraries is proceeding at a rapid pace.
- Significantly more powerful search engines will make accessing mushrooming information more manageable.
- Universally available wireless broadband and satellite communication in most developed regions of the globe will give users continuous access to most information and individuals worldwide.
- When the pastor speaks of some current world event, many members will quickly access a digi-cam from that area to observe what is happening in real time.
- When the pastor shares a statistic, several members will quickly access the original research to see if the figure is accurate. A member who discovers the pastor exaggerated the actual facts may likely text his discipleship cell group scattered across the congregation. This may lead the cell group to quickly exchange online opinions about the need to censure the pastor because of his tendency to stretch the truth.

- Baby dedication may prompt the men in the booth to ensure the congregation catches a whiff of Johnson's Baby Oil. Another button may permit a vanilla whiff to accompany the lighting of candles on the platform.
- The missions pastor may present to the congregation the challenge of funding a new church building in a third-world country. At the end of this challenge, all members may take out their digital devices to move funds to the church account. In less than a minute, the giant video screens may report the grand total of funds given. This image may be quickly followed by a live shot from the vacant lot where the building will be built. The giving church then gets to be blessed immediately as the ground breaking ceremony begins.

Providing a preview of the fate of most congregations in a decade, I believe there are three types of churches today:

### Traditional, Non-Adapting Churches

These churches are often led by sincere leaders who do wish to see their churches have kingdom impact. Their unwillingness to understand the times and to make adjustments to a more vibrant church life causes their sincere dreams to go unfulfilled.

Churches all across the spectrum can show resistance to change and new wine skins. Pastors who wear robes – or those who handle snakes – are equally tempted to resist change.

Today, these churches are plateaued or slightly declining in membership. In many fellowships, these churches make up 60-70% of churches. By projecting trends out ten years, tens of thousands of churches will be unable to meet minimum financial obligations, and their buildings will be offered up for sale. Some will be purchased by church plants anxious to build a new kind of church in existing buildings. Others will become Moslem mosques or other expressions of growing religious pluralism in the U.S.

### Churches That Do the Wrong Thing with Excellence

In ten years there may be many churches that are huge and in the public eye.

Churches can function and even prosper numerically for a time without being biblically sound or focused. God removed His presence from the temple as recorded in Ezekiel 10. Even so, temple worship continued on for hundreds of years.

Across the next ten years, some churches will get better and better at doing the wrong thing – with

excellence. For a while, they will appear to be successful.

Such churches will build buildings to support segregation - and they will do so with excellence. They will not build to support racial segregation, but to support age segregation. They will build children's buildings that will segregate those children from other age groups. The buildings will be built with the flawed philosophy that spiritual transformation most likely occurs in huge theaters focused on multi-sensory, better-than-Disney sets, video, and animation.

Such churches will build youth centers costing millions. Both the natural appeal of such buildings and the programming centered there will almost guarantee teenagers will only experience church life with people almost precisely their own age. Adults will find no ways to bless children much

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less even see them. Young people will be cut off from the richness of almost all adult relationships. And, most importantly, they will not see members of their own families until it is time to meet at the car to go home.

Such churches will use focus-group research in order to design Starbucks-on-steroids buildings for adults. These stress-free zones will allow adults to enjoy conversation and fellowship with peers, without the bother of children and youth. In the 1980s, adults paid age-group ministers to do their work for them. In the 1990s, they added paid interns to further guarantee they would not be called on to help. Ten years from now, perhaps the entire age-group staff will be paid by those who enjoy escaping into a pleasant world of adults.

Such churches, because of their size, will command amazing financial resources. They will spend those funds, with excellence, on the wrong things. Providing services to church members will be the clear priority. In a true symbiotic relationship, the pastors will find it easy to raise funds when they use those funds to make members better-entertained and more comfortable.

Such churches will include perfunctory prayer in their worship services and classes. But like everything else, prayer will be a human activity manipulated to touch the heart. Lighting, sound, touch, and smell may be orchestrated to create a feeling, but the feeling will be



### Local Church

The church is God's primary agency for building His Kingdom. We actively commit ourselves to faithful involvement in the local church as a model and encouragement for students to do the same.

unrelated to conversation with the Living God.

Because God's hand of blessing will not be on such churches, they will make up the difference by imitating corporate successes, marketing dollars, proven advertising strategies, and doing everything they do with excellence. Such churches will be successful numerically, and will be in full view ten years from now.

### Biblical Churches Close to the Heart of God

Churches just becoming visible in the U.S. in 2006 may grow and proliferate in the next ten years. These are churches built on a biblical model of church life, focused on completing the Great Commission, and centered on relationships with God and among His followers. Such churches are rare in the U.S. but are common in many regions of the world.

Such churches are desperate for God, for revival, for the transformation of culture, and the evangelization

the capacity for great faith. Out of their desperation they listen closely for prophetic instructions about how to move forward to impact the world for Christ. Once they get their marching orders, they get off their knees and move forward with unstoppable confidence. Their own stories of redemption and healing make them want to share Christ with others. Their own love for the heart of God makes them want to expand His renown in all the world.

At home, such believers ask God to show them an acceptable lifestyle of simplicity. They do so in order to free resources for kingdom activity. For example, they always are preparing financially for family members to take the gospel to new places – and to support others who will go where they cannot go. When believers gather at church, the issue is the same: How can the church function in the most frugal manner possible in order to release resources for kingdom activity?

Such churches appreciate and value staff and volunteers who have a clear call from God to invest in teenagers. Their salaries, budget support, and expressions of affirmation all communicate they are valuable as they stand in the gap with the young. These principles are the same for those who minister to and with all children, from birth to young adulthood.

Such churches have an even greater appreciation for the power and influence of parents in the lives of their own youth. Consequently, such churches give careful attention to training parents to rear their children. When damage to relationships already has happened, they teach parents and teenagers how to forgive and move past the bitterness. In general, they lead the parents to turn their hearts toward their children – knowing that the probable result will be the turning of the hearts of the children to their parents.

Such churches also train parents how to spiritually lead and teach their own children. Those churches give careful attention to quality Bible teaching at church for children, but always view this as secondary in importance to teaching in the home. Along with training, such churches place in the hands of parents the printed resources they need to teach well.

Such churches give careful attention to quality events and activities for teenagers, but always view them as secondary in importance to immersing teenagers in relationships with a few godly adults. These churches know that spiritual transformation is much more likely from integrity relationships between teenagers and adults than from events and activities. At minimum, such churches prepare

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of the lost – both locally and globally. They tend to humble themselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from wicked ways.

Pervasive, extended, and sacrificial callings to prayer permeate the life of these churches. When God so leads, prayer always takes priority over sleep, eating, or creature comforts. If leaders and volunteers were to plan well but not pray for some church function, they would know they were at risk of seeing no impact.

In such churches, the senior pastor and other core leaders demonstrate genuine brokenness and humility before God. Their brokenness leads to consistent private confession of sin - and public confession as directed by Scripture and the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

The brokenness and the grace exhibited by senior leadership makes the church warm and accepting of all peoples. The lost have fellowship with the redeemed. The consecrated have fellowship with the immoral. Members from racial groups with historic anger toward each other worship in complete unity. Those whose lives are scarred drive by dozens of churches to get to the one that accepts and loves them just as they are.

Believers who discover intimacy with the heart of God and vibrant relationships with others develop

godly adults to invest one to two hours a week in a student for a year.

Such churches know at times they will provide highly-quality events for teenagers – and other times place the focus on one-on-one relationships. Such churches know at times they will provide events just for teenagers – and other times provide events for teenagers and their parents or other members of the congregation. Churches make such decisions based on purpose. They always ask, “Is our specific purpose at this moment best served by an event or by a relationship?...By programming for teenagers and their youth leaders – or by teenagers immersed in family or intergenerational groupings?” Once the question of purpose is settled, such churches move forward with a commitment to excellence.

These will be churches that model before teenagers:

- A desperation for God
- Pervasive prayer
- Great faith when God announces how to move forward.

These churches will:

- Turn the hearts of the parents and the teenagers toward each other
- Teach the parents how to spiritually lead and teach
- Place in front of teenagers youth leaders and ministry volun-

teers who model Christ and His love

- Immerse teenagers in the full life of the congregation
- Bond every teenager with a godly adult who will disciple and mentor
- Teach the Bible, worship, minister, and provide activities in group settings with excellence.

As a result, they will have the greatest probably of producing high school graduates who:

- Live in intimate relationship with Christ
- Have no higher life goal than to see the glory of God expand in all nations
- Are in a lifetime love relationship with the local church
- Are personally committed to the completion of the Great Commission – locally and globally
- Are ready to live – or die, if so called – to see God’s kingdom come on earth. ↻



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