



# Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

# 05

History of  
Youth Ministry

# **Youth Ministry Training**

## **Lesson Five: History of Youth Ministry**

### **Lesson Introduction**

#### **Session Overview**

- A Historical View of Youth
- Global Youth Culture and North American Historical Definitions of Youth
- Cycles of Youth Ministry in North America
- History of Nazarene Youth Ministry

#### **Learner Objectives**

At the end of this session you should:

- Recognize the historical influences on social definitions of youth and young adults
- Identify Sunday School as one of the beginning points of youth ministry
- Recognize several 19th century youth ministries; particularly Christian Endeavor Societies as the forerunner of contemporary youth groups
- Review 20th century North American youth ministry developments including congregationally-based young people's societies, parachurch youth clubs, as well as see youth ministry as a maturing academic discipline and Christian norm
- Understand the beginnings of the NYI and its commitment to purity, mission, scripture, and youth empowerment

#### **Introduction**

This session helps youth workers understand the historical origins of youth ministry, particularly within the Church of the Nazarene, in order to effectively draft an NYI ministry plan in accordance with the NYI Charter.

### **Lesson Body**

#### **A Historical View of Youth**

To be honest, most people live roughly in a 100 to 120 year-old historical “box.” In other words, our historical awareness of how life functions remains shaped by roughly three generations of human knowledge and experience. When we are born we rely on our parents’ and grandparents’ generations for their understanding of history and how the world should work. As we grow older, and grandparents pass away, we replace that distant history with our own experience... and later that of our children... in understanding of how things “should work.” Unless we take time to cultivate a larger view of history we remain limited by our assumptions, sometimes repeating mistakes of the past, or struggling with the unexamined expectations of others. However, when we turn to a better understanding of our historical roots we find resources for not only for understanding, but often for inspiration, as youth workers.

Before discussing the history of youth ministry, you must recognize that you have to deal with youth themselves. Honestly the concept of “youth” remains an elusive topic in history, the age Joseph Kett defines as “semi-dependence” where young people live in a world neither fully dependent on adults nor fully independent as contributors to society.

While biblical studies of children and the family have grown in recent years, specific studies of youth or young adults remain limited. Perhaps for good reason, since one of the earliest biblical accounts of youth or young adults may well be Deuteronomy 21:18-21, where parents are given permission to punish disobedient sons by stoning them to death!

Nevertheless, one does find evidence of youth and even youth culture at different points in history. Often, in pre-industrial Europe, poor youth did not qualify to inherit their family’s meager farms. Instead they found themselves forced to wander the countryside or move to towns. As wanderers, these young people (mainly boys) often banded together through apprenticeships or other “groups” in Britain, Germany and France until they reach some sense of professional competence or economic independence.

While elusive, there does seem to be a relationship between young people who are no longer children but not quite adults, and the culture they live within. Seeing our concept of youth tied to culture and history allows us to understand how the same concept may be understood differently in different global settings. For instance, in many cultures, young people do not advance to adulthood until marriage—regardless of age. Rather than fixing a strict age level to this category, one must pay attention to the specific historical and cultural expectations, asking how the church can best minister with a group of people who live in the transition between childhood and adulthood.

### **Global Youth Culture and North American Historical Definitions of Youth**

For all of the local emphasis on cultural expectation of youth, today one finds a global “youth culture,” exported with similar norms and expectations communicated primarily through media. This youth culture seems to be primarily a western export, including some of the popular ideas concerning the nature of youth ministry. Recognizing this prevalent—albeit primarily North American view—of youth and youth ministry, youth workers may find it instructive to explore how these concepts surfaced out of their historical circumstances.

Believe it or not, the age of adolescence has not always been a part of historical study. Until the end of the 19th century, children went through the teenage years, but these years were largely viewed either the end of childhood or the beginning of adulthood. The time for transition was generally quite short, though recognizable even in Christian circles for less than desirable reasons. For instance, young people were often blamed for spiritual or moral decline by older generations during the foundation of the United States, making them primary targets of many revival campaigns in later periods.

Nevertheless, the primary discovery of youth as adolescents occurred around the turn of the 20th century. There were many social factors that influenced the development of adolescence as a specific developmental and social age: specifically, the rise of the industrial era when fewer

young people needed to work, the creation of mandatory public school systems that provided a new social setting, and the rise of economic wealth which turned young people into consumers.

Chief among these influences was the work of social scientists. G. Stanley Hall. Hall, who was heavily influenced by the ideas of evolutionist Charles Darwin, applied the scientific, biological aspects of Darwin's views to the study of adolescent development. By 1904, Hall's study affirmed the belief that heredity interacts with environmental influences to determine the individual's development. He asserted adolescence defined a time of "storm and stress" in a person's life, where conflict abounds. Hall's definition of youth, combined with the other social influences created a historical/cultural view of a distinct age-level or youth "subculture" recognized today. The post world-war II concept of "teenager" did not surface until 1941, in a *Popular Science Magazine*. Throughout the twentieth century, young people in the United States stayed in school longer, delayed life decisions like marriage and vocation, yet gained greater consumer influence due to the economic generosity of their parents. The idea of young people, "struggling" to make the now longer transition from childhood to adulthood was a part of the social fabric of Western society. While explaining why adolescents don't act like adults, Ron Koteskey stated that one reason is the self-fulfilling prophecy—namely, that young people act irresponsible, immature, etc. because that is what adults expect of them. If we take this idea seriously, what should be the expectations of the church for adolescents? Perhaps some clues surface from the history of youth ministry in the same context, North America.

### **Cycles of Youth Ministry in North America**

If one chooses a logical beginning point for ministry with youth, at least in Western culture, one could begin with Robert Raike's (circa 1780-1786) creation of the Sunday School in England. While normally associated with ministry to younger children, there is evidence that Raike's ministry would have included older children that today would be consider early and middle adolescents. Admittedly starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century may seem like an arbitrary point to begin. However, the rise of Sunday School ministries marked the beginning of a special "para-church" ministry that spread throughout North America and marked a special emphasis on providing Christian education to children and youth alike.

As noted, just as many recent ideas about "youth" emerge from North American soil, so do many assumptions concerning the nature of youth ministry. Therefore, a historical overview of these efforts may prove helpful for understanding the assumptions and expressions of youth ministry in other cultures. If you look throughout history, there are historical patterns that seem evident. The same proves true of youth ministry. In 1992, Mark Senter wrote *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry*, where he details three historical cycles and speculates about the start of a new fourth cycle. Each cycle lasts approximately fifty years and every cycle follows the same pattern: for the first 20-30 years of a youth movement there was an excitement and constant innovation which drove it forward in attempts to reach the young people for Christ. Then around year 30 something happened. Stagnation began to characterize the movement and increasingly did so for the next 20 years while the movement's earlier momentum and good reputation carried it along. Finally, a crisis happened and there was no longer a way to disguise the fact that the movement was bankrupt.

### *Cycle 1 – Expansion and Interventions (1824-1875)*

The first cycle of youth ministry in North America was deeply influenced by the rise of the modern era, often called the Enlightenment, which placed heavy emphasis on human reason and questioned religious convictions. In addition, families in the United States experienced fragmentation due to western expansion and the beginning of the industrial revolution which altered the pattern of people's lives and the way they earned a living. The national struggle over the issue of slavery also challenged and divided youth during this era.

In response to these changing social conditions, the American Sunday School Union (1785/1830) started out by trying to place a Sunday School in about 4,500 new locations throughout the southeastern United States. The Sunday School became the most widely spread agency for working with youth. However, they soon fell into a rut, having organized more new Sunday Schools than adequate leadership. In addition, young people also benefited from the new Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations, the YMCA (London 1844/USA 1851), and YWCA (London 1855/USA 1858) tried to fill void that young people faced. The purpose of these para-church agencies was to help young people retain their Christian commitments after they had moved into the urban jungles where jobs were available. This led to a huge revival that swept the United States between 1857-1859. In addition, a number of other movements took strong root during this time: singing schools (1717) served as the forerunner of the gospel music tradition, young people's missionary societies (circa 1790's) and temperance unions which opposed the use of alcohol (circa 1820's).

Two key crises seem to stop this cycle. The first was the Civil War (1861-1865) where over 600,000 soldiers died, half of them teenagers. The second was the birth and support by taxation of the Public High School (1875). This public movement helped to completely change the nation's definition of youth. The discovery of adolescence, both from a legal perspective and an educational point of view, meant that youth work would have to change. It should be noted, oddly enough, that the various agencies and grassroots movements of the first cycle still existed at the end of the 20th century. Singing schools have become church choirs. Temperance unions have been succeeded by Students Against Drunk Driving societies. Young people's missionary societies now are agencies like Youth with a Mission and Teen Mission. Sunday Schools have become places for students to socialize and learn in the church. Only the YMCA/YWCA seemed to shift their emphasis away from Christian support.

### *Cycle 2 - The Period of Accountability (1881-1925)*

The second cycle surfaced as cities and urban living replaced rural life. By 1920, 73% of people in the United States had non-agriculture related jobs. With the Industrial Revolution in full swing, the mechanization of farm equipment and creation of factory assembly lines made it possible to carry out tasks once performed solely by human labor. This had a direct impact on young people who often tended simple machines until automated and efficient machines made this type of labor unnecessary. Also 25 million people immigrated to the US between 1900 and 1920, limiting work options. Education became the norm for youth as high school graduates increased from 6.4% in 1900 to 60% by 1956. Isolated from work, public schools provided an institutional context where youth were given a new social role and set of psychological tasks.

New movements surfaced to reach young people. Francis E. Clark founded the Society for Christian Endeavor (1881), built on the idea of accountability. Students signed a pledge to be present at every meeting, and at least once a month to give an accounting of their spiritual progress. Though each society was under the authority of the host church and pastor, the international conventions, regional conferences, and area-wide rallies brought an interdenominational flavor to the movement. Fearing a loss of denominational identity and loyalty, denominations created their youth society and began producing appropriate literature. The societies were so popular they were adopted by many churches and denominations like the Luther "League" and (Methodist) Epworth "League" as church related youth groups. Into this setting stepped the first professional youth workers, employed by denominations who traveled from site to site to oversee and give guidance to the local ministry. Soon, however, these independent Christian movements began to lose their influence over middle-class young people. Instead new youth associations surfaced (circa 1910), like Boy and Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, 4-H Clubs, and Boys Club of America. While not associated with churches, the groups shared an ethic based on a Judeo-Christian heritage. These groups emphasized wholesome activities designed to build character in boys and girls. Since these groups required free time and discretionary moneys in order to participate, the youth movements of the second cycle remained solidly middle-class.

The second cycle ended due to the expansion of the public education. While youth movements remained largely static in design, public high schools made radical changes. By the 1929-1930 school year, nearly 5 million students were enrolled in secondary schools. School curriculum changed as well. There was less emphasis placed on religion, and more on socially relevant courses. Science, and specifically evolution, increasingly began to take its place in the curriculum. The school, rather than the church, had now become the focal point of the community. Conservative Christians, bristling over the Scopes evolution trial (1925) withdrew from the general public and sought to develop their own communities of support.

### *Cycle 3 - Reaching Youth for Christ (1935-1987)*

The great Depression in the United States (1929-1941) caused young people to move from thinking about fun to thinking about survival. At the height of the depression, more than 250,000 teenagers were living on the road in America. In addition, more and more students stayed in school longer, due to the scarcity of jobs. In the meantime, religious instruction was being removed from the public school, which left a vacuum of religious and moral instruction. Finally, the advent of World War II (1939-1945) sent many leaders to serve in the war and often youth ministry simply ceased to exist. However, the war created a crusade spirit and, as the former leaders of youth ministry returned home, they carried with them the idea that they had saved the world politically and militarily. Now they would endeavor to save it spiritually.

Several new movements surfaced to reach young people. A number of independent "Youth for Christ Associations" (circa 1940) began during the depression and war years. As WWII came to a close, America was ready to celebrate. Ten years of depression followed by six years of war had put a damper on the nation. All that was needed was an excuse to enjoy life and a bit or organizational "know-how." YFC provided both. Jack Wyrzten and Billy Graham were most

responsible for the Saturday night rallies which became their primary method to reach youth. In the 1960's Campus Life (a branch of YFC) adopted a two-part approach to reaching teens: Insight meetings for discipleship purposes, and Impact meetings for evangelism. Jim Rayburn founded Young Life (1941) with mass rallies similar to YFC, but soon scrapped them in favor of a club- and camp-based strategy. Soon Campus Life and many other groups adopted this model. For instance, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (1954) influenced athletes at all levels using "huddles" (small groups) as well as conferences and camps to present the Gospel. Campus Crusade (1966) started with college ministries and moved to high school ministries (Student Venture with a primary emphasis was on discipleship through small groups. Once again denominations felt the need to maintain their identity and loyalty among students by creating programs that rivaled the parachurch organizations.

This cycle began to end with the rise of the professional youth worker. As servicemen returned from the war, they wanted to make a difference, and often went into the ministry. Thousands of people went into professional youth ministry, largely in response to the initial "Baby Boom" of new children born between 1945 and 1965. Unfortunately, volunteer youth workers felt either obsolete or second-class citizens. New organizations like Youth Specialties/Group (1968/1974) were instrumental in helping local churches adopt the ideas of Young Life, YFC, Campus Crusade and the other clubs. These organizations initiated national and local training such as well as extended efforts through publishing. It would be easy to say that these factors breathed new life into the local youth group. Actually, the opposite is true. The Youth Specialties/Group phenomenon merely allowed an increasing number of youth workers to communicate more effectively to an ever-decreasing population. It may be the last gasp before the death of the third cycle.

#### *Cycle 4 – "Emerging" Youth Ministry (1990-???)*

A shift in the way young people think, call postmodern thinking, and a loss of influence by current approaches to youth ministry signal new forces that influence this next cycle. Postmodernism may be a difficult term to define but the concept describes both certain contemporary perspectives and cultural tendencies. Due to rapid technological changes and many different cultural influences, young people have a greater tolerance for ambiguity, multiple interpretations of a given situation, and openness to new ideas. In the meantime, church and parachurch ministry methods do not seem to be reaching students in North American context. Youth workers will begin to look for new approaches to youth ministry and means of reaching the community much like parachurch ministries did in the last cycle.

What will this cycle look like? There are some clues. First, in light of diverse, global, cultures, youth ministry will require leaders from those cultures to stand up and create ministry which caters to their ethnic group. With more youth in cities, urban-suburban links will be vital in breeding new strategies for youth ministry. Evangelism will tend to focus more on small groups than massive rallies and even one-on-one evangelism. Worship and prayer appear to be more important to youth today, yet ministry may well occur outside traditional church settings (much like previous movements) where many innovative ideas surface. Lay leadership seems to be on the rise, with the professional youth minister serving more as a trainer of adults who do the hands-on ministry. Many of these new professional youth workers will also be women, who

already account for more than one-third of the youth workers in local churches in the North America. While all aspects of the fourth cycle of youth ministry remain unknown, youth workers around the world recognize changes will occur in the coming years. Our challenge will be to integrate these new innovations while relating them to the history we know in the Church of the Nazarene.

### **History of Nazarene Youth Ministry**

NYI Global Director, Gary Hartke's February 2005 report, "The Organizational History of Nazarene Youth International in the USA", provides a helpful overview of the history of youth ministry in the denomination. Drawing from a number of helpful resources, his synopsis provides a helpful understanding of the history and future of the global NYI. Hartke notes youth ministry began in the very first Church of the Nazarene, founded in 1895 by Phineas Bresee, in Los Angeles, California. By 1903, there were two youth ministries entitled "Company E" and the "Brotherhood of St. Stephen" offered to the young people in Bresee's church. Company E included young ladies in the church who met on Friday evenings for study of the Word, united and intercessory prayer, testimonies, and evangelism. Members of the groups searched for a verse that would represent their desire to live what they described as "the higher Christian life." The two groups ultimately agreed on 1 Timothy 4:12 as their theme verse: "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." (King James Version) These young people of Company E and The Brotherhood of St. Stephen wore a badge which consisted of a Maltese cross with "I Tim 4:12" engraved into it. The young men and young women wore this badge as a visual reminder of their commitment to live the higher Christian life. In 1907, the leadership of the Church of the Nazarene began what would be a fifteen year journey of a general youth ministry by the creation of a fourteen member Committee on Young People. These early expressions of Nazarene youth ministry begin to explain how young people and the vision of holiness and missional outreach continues throughout the history of the Church of the Nazarene. At times, efforts to reach and disciple youth fell behind a largely adult effort at evangelism and church consolidation, but never for long. At times youth ministry became the central setting for ministerial leadership training in the Church of the Nazarene, and the location for innovation and new expressions of organization for the sake of ministry from the inception of the Nazarene Young People's Society in 1923, to the establishment of Nazarene Youth International in 1977.

By 2001, the NYI ratified a Charter and Ministry Plans. The Charter provided the foundation for youth ministry globally. The Ministry Plans provided a standard local, district, and regional ministry plan. However, instructions were included to enable each level to modify the plans resulting in more effective ministry. In addition to clear lines of accountability to the local congregation, the NYI was empowered with a degree of flexibility to make ministry more effective and charged with three particular ministry responsibilities: Evangelism, Discipleship and Lay Leadership. The result of the newly ratified Charter and Ministry Plan marked significant changes at the global and local level.



## **Application**

Identify the historical movements that still influence your current youth ministry. What changes do you see occurring that might signal a start of a fourth cycle?

Develop a sound plan for youth ministry that includes both a Biblical/theological foundation as well as a historical appreciation of the expectations of any youth ministry.

Review your local youth ministry setting in light of the NYI's History, Charter and Ministry Plan. How would you assess the ministry and what improvements might you suggest?

## **Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

*What is your definition of "youth" or "young adult"? Is there another word in your community/culture that is preferred? What ages do you typically assign to this category? Why?*

*How do adults in your church define youth? Why? How do people in your congregation 'know' who belongs in the youth group? What is the criteria?*

*Do you agree with Kett's definition of semi-independence for youth? How do you react to the statement: While explaining why adolescents don't act like adults, Ron Koteskey states that one reason is the self-fulfilling prophecy—namely, that young people act irresponsible, immature, etc. because that is what adults expect of them.*

*How would you define the historical forces that now influence youth ministry? Where do you see signs of new forms of youth ministry that will shape the future?*



Nazarene Youth International

