



Church Planting and Youth Ministry

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"This church is a lot smaller than the one we attended before we moved here, but we kind of like it. It's comfortable. We've met most of the people already. We understand your sermons, and they challenge us. We agree with you theologically. We could really get involved in ministry in a church like this. We'd really like to settle in here, but in a couple of years our children will be teenagers. We're thinking we need to go to a larger church where their needs can be met."

Every church planter and small church pastor has heard some version of this scenario more times than they care to remember. Though there are many, many more small churches than large churches in America, the varied program offerings of large churches often get top billing. Anyone who is a small church pastor or church planter in anything except a branch church of a Super Church, must address these concerns. The sentiments of families like the one above need to be answered. So how does one answer? How **do** we meet the needs of teens in smaller churches?

"Families are far more important than youth groups," is probably not a good response – though in many ways it is a quite accurate one. But it does not address the genuine concern of parents for the frightening teen age years that lie just ahead.

"I agree, and you should probably seek a larger church," might not be wise either. Who wants to lose a family who love the Word, enjoy the fellowship, and want to serve? Besides, is finding a larger church actually in the best interest of their children?

So, **how do we meet the needs of teens** in a small church setting?

Address the need openly and honestly.

Family influences are of utmost importance, but teens typically enjoy and profit from interaction with their peers. If some opportunity is not provided for them, they will either create their own opportunities or become reclusive. If they create their own opportunities, pastor and parents lose an important opportunity to direct and oversee the kinds of activities and people involved. If they become reclusive, they will not be prepared to be part of the church's great commission to take the gospel to the world. So, recognize the special needs of the teenage years. Discuss the specifics of those needs openly and frankly with parents grappling with them. Make a commitment to be involved to whatever degree is necessary in the lives of their teenage children.

Use smallness to your advantage.

Two caring adults and three or four teens on a hiking trip, an outing to the ball park, a visit to an historic area, or cross country skiing is a great opportunity. The adults can reinforce parental standards, and the teens discover that their parents are not the only people in the world with high standards and expectations. Add the fact that everybody enjoys it, and you have a win, win situation. Dave was a young man participating in a newly planted church in Oregon. His children were still infants, but he took interest in the 3 or 4 teens in the church. They skied, hiked, explored caves, and played games. Those teens still remember Dave's genuine concern for them. Dave, whose family is now nearly grown, is still doing youth ministry things.

Join forces with another group.

Very small groups can have great fun and provide unparalleled opportunities for discipling, but they need a larger identity. Two or three teens in a small church need to know that they are not the only three people in their community or world who are committed to knowing and serving Jesus Christ. This is one reason summer camping events have been so important for so many years. With more and more teens working or zealously pursuing sports, shorter events might have to be crafted. One must obviously choose carefully when deciding what groups and events are appropriate. Planning must be done carefully, but the end achieved will be worth the effort.

The need for joining forces with others of like mind is the basis for such fellowships as IFCA International. Like the prophet Elijah who thought he was the only one who had not bowed to Baal, our teens often feel alone in the world. The annual Youth Convention provides opportunity for teens to get to know other teens from across the county. At youth convention they also meet students from various Christian institutions of higher education, and their horizon is expanded even more.

Train your teens to serve.

A far greater percentage of youth coming from small churches enter vocational Christian service than those coming from larger churches. Often this happens because teens in small churches were pressed into service out of necessity, and then are naturally drawn toward that kind of service vocationally. How much better, however, to make training teens for ministry our goal instead of a default necessity. There are so very many ways to serve, that an infinite variety of ages and abilities can be involved. Find ways for musically talented teens to use that ability. Introduce some to teaching. Appoint a teen as a part time secretarial assistant, even if the net effect is to cost you more time. Start teens serving along side their parents and other adults, and they will soon be serving on their own. Train them, assist them, acknowledge them, and help them see the fruit of their labor. Seeing God touch other lives through my small ministry is a life changing experience!

Emphasize families in ministry.

A mother, father, and a couple of teenagers, joined with another such family unit, would make a great missions team! Even small churches profit

by sending a family or two to serve in another small church for a special ministry. Yes, it takes some much needed personnel away for a time. When they come back, however, they do so with expanded horizons and a new zeal for ministry at home.

The key to youth ministry in church planting is creatively meeting the needs of teens without feeling the need of a large group. No doubt, some families will still leave because they prefer a larger church. That's ok. When the church you are planting gets to that size, they will feel comfortable, and you can start the process all over again with another church plant!

A final word of personal testimony.

We were church planters with teenage children. Dave, the young man mentioned above, was part of our church. We have not seen Dave for quite a few years, but we still remember the time he spent with a few teens. The suggestions shared above are the things we did to meet the needs of our own children. Our children are now adults, and are all serving in various capacities in their churches – two as laypersons, one vocationally. They will all tell you that large youth groups may be nice, but they did not feel deprived in a small church. We, their parents, have never regretted that, during their teenage years, we left a church with a thriving youth group to be church planters.

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