

Passionate Discipleship

Six Foundations

A Canadian Baptist Youth Initiative

Foundation #6

COMMITMENT TO THE LOCAL CHURCH



FOUNDATION #6

Passionate Disciples are Committed to the Local Church

Many churches in Canada have comprehensive youth ministries starting with the early teen years up until a student graduates from high school. However, there are significant warning signs that reveal these same youth, who have been active members of local church youth groups through their teen years, are not transitioning well after high school. Initial statistics and general observations are pointing to a significant loss of young adults in local churches.

In this chapter we want to suggest that one sign of passionate discipleship is a love and commitment to the local church.

Growing Up on a Conveyor Belt

On Sunday morning, my family has breakfast together, travels to church together, walks across the parking lot together, and then scatters as soon as we enter the church building. My youngest goes to the nursery, my four-year-old goes to the preschool room and my oldest two sons head to another part of the building for their program. My wife and I go to different Sunday school classes, as she teaches a women's class. We finally all meet again at the coat rack, walk back across the parking lot, load into our vehicle and drive home to sit around the same table.

From the moment we are born we probably experience a church program and environment that is designed to our specific needs. This certainly has a lot of merit given what we know about age-specific teaching methods. However, most church members spend the majority of their time in such programs – nursery, children's church, Sunday school, midweek programs, youth groups, mom/dad's groups, seniors' groups – and rarely gather all together. There are few moments of intergenerational connecting. It's like a ministry conveyor belt where people get on and everything is provided.

The challenge for young adults is that for the first time in their lives there is no age-specific program for them. They ask the obvious questions: "Where do I go? Where do I belong?" They have been travelling on the conveyor belt and suddenly they flip off the end.

Rinse and Repeat

One of the challenges of discipleship is to be able to identify how our culture has tainted our view of the gospel. In the West, consumerism has affected our thinking, and consequently our actions. In many ways, youth ministry is dependent upon a consumer-culture framework – from our advertising to our activities to the basic ethos of "show up and we will feed you." Some of the most exciting new methods in youth ministry are ones where youth are required to join the group as participants or owners in the ministry, not attendees and consumers. We need to keep asking God to rinse us of the impact of our consumer culture.

Again, there is some merit to having an engaging ministry that attracts rather than repels people. However, we need to be careful that we are creating disciples, not consumers – people who long to give of themselves, not only receive. Where does this begin? What does it look like? How do we start?

Community in Messy Time

Creating passionate disciples means being part of a community, and being part of a community is not about having things our way but learning how to surrender to the needs of others. A verse that comes to mind is, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk. 9:35 NIV). It is not about getting our way or having things the way we think they ought to be, because it’s not about us.

When I hear people talking about community, I often wonder where they found such a perfect, unselfish group of people with which to practice community. True community is not as romantic as it sounds, and it’s messy. If true community – biblical community – is really happening, it should be messy. We often focus on the stories of people sharing everything and living together (Acts 2:42-47), but forget to address the issues of fake generosity (Acts 5) or appropriately caring for all community members (Acts 6).

Youth should be experiencing community in their youth ministry days, but not only with other youth. Youth ministries must find ways to make meaningful connections with the other members of the church family. This effort to integrate youth into the larger church family will take intentional effort and will mean the youth leaders will have to straddle the youth and adult world to make it happen.

Bashing the Bride

I think another reason why many youth feel disconnected from their local church is the way they hear their youth leaders, parents, or other adults talk about it. If anyone ever spoke poorly or disparagingly about my bride there would be trouble. Yet we so often allow others to speak negatively about the local church. This doesn’t mean we can’t have a conversation about ways we are not fulfilling our calling as a community of Jesus’ followers, but some people just complain about the local church as an institution. Should we be having these conversations? Are we qualified to make judgments about whether a group is really being the church? We need to watch the way we talk about the church and the people in our churches around our youth.

Might we say that a mark of a disciple is that they are falling more in love with the church, regardless of her state, because they are more in love with Christ? Might we say that the deeper we go into discipleship, the greater vision we receive of what the church ought to be and how we might be part of it?

Intergenerational Church

The emphasis on needs-based ministry over the last two decades has changed the lens through which we see those who attend our church. We have learned to see people primarily as members of subgroups, instead of members of the church. This is partly for very practical reasons, but often the result is that people never really feel a part of the greater whole – the local church and the global Church.

Maybe we should be asking: “Do our youth identify primarily with the local church or the youth group?” If it’s with the youth group, what changes can we make so they feel as though they are primarily a member of the church, and secondarily a member of their youth group? As you can imagine, this involves a tremendous amount of conversation that we don’t have time for here, but it requires a change in the entire church culture.

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has challenged you to consider an approach to youth ministry that allows youth to become a more significant part of your local church. While there is still a time and place for youth to meet alone with their youth leaders, this shouldn’t be their only exposure to church. It is critical that youth see themselves as members of the local church first and foremost, and then of the youth group.

We’re looking for real life examples of this! Please send your stories and photos to:
communications@cbmin.org

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. How many adults do your youth come in contact with in a typical week in your youth ministry?
2. How do you think the adults in your church perceive the students? Do they have positive or negative associations?
3. What bothers your youth most about your church? What makes them the most proud?
4. If the youth could change anything in the church, what would they change first? Why?

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