

From Traditional to Relational: Introducing the 4-Fs Paradigm for Postmodern Youth Ministry

Ryan Simpson, Youth Ministries Director, Bermuda Conference

Abstract

Postmodernism hurls a plethora of multiple challenges at today's young people. More and more, we are feeling the symptoms of urbanization, mobility, fragmentation of the traditional community, technology, democratization and individualism. Consequently, the great call of our youth today is for more spirituality, community and authenticity; a call to which traditional youth ministry can no longer respond. A relational youth ministry model built on what I have termed the 4Fs Principles of Faith, Fun, Food, and Fellowship has proved to counter the challenges posed by postmodernism and to provide a way forward for youth ministry. Faith is an essential factor for young people of this generation. Fun is an important tool because there are many other things competing for young people's attention. Food brings young people together and creates opportunities, lasting impressions and Fellowships enables young people to have a sense of belonging before they believe and behave.

Introduction

Youth and young adult commitment to the Church has drastically declined. This has been the case in virtually all Christian faiths such as the Catholic, Adventist, and other Protestants (McCorquodale, et. al., 2004). Youth ministry of the early 1990s in Seventh-day Adventist in Jamaica, for example, was simpler than it is today. During this time most Adventist churches had large and vibrant youth groups. Youth Sabbath Schools, Adventist Youth Society meetings and the

Pathfinder Clubs were well attended. The sum total of youth ministry centered in the AY society program on Sabbath afternoons. This scripted and predictable program included a recitation of the A.Y. mantra, the secretary's report of the previous week's meeting, a song service and the activity session which included a Bible games, rap sessions or any other Christian related activity. The day's activities would climax with a grand social. In addition, the youth ministry leaders used to frequently organize trips to the beach or a picnic to the park. There were also the usual

Summer Camps and the Easter Pathfinder Camps. This was the traditional youth ministry model.

The traditional approach did not integrate into its programs all the aspects of life that affected the youth. Some very important aspects sometimes overlooked included the social, emotional, relational and physical. The traditional model was more intentional about the spiritual and less intentional, if at all, about other areas. This model of youth ministry succeeded at least in the spiritualization of the youth (Neufeld, 2002). However, in many regards, it came short in areas that involved the youth in dialogue and to seek for their opinions, interests, ideas and concerns. It was didactic rather than engaging. The inclusion of a social or physical element, especially in a Sabbath program, would be strongly discouraged as unacceptable and irreverent. For this reason youth were not allowed to invent other activities of interest to them. The model depends on forces other than the youth.

The Driving Force behind Yesterday's Youth Ministry Model

Compared to the declining youth ministry of this period, traditional youth ministry flourished because of the following circumstantial factors.

Force: Urbanization in the early 1990s was in its infancy. For example, individualism was almost unheard of in the Caribbean, from where I came. The traditional community was mostly intact and the extended family and the local community still reared the children. To attend or not to attend school and church was a choice for this body to make, not the young person. The unwritten law was that, "one always attends church as long one resides under their parents' roof, regardless of age."

There were fewer options: During these earlier times, church attendance would rank

very high on a young person's weekend list of activities, especially the Adventist Youth programs and the Saturday night socials. For one, the "churched culture" of the 1950s (Neufeld, 2002) was still the reality of that time. Additionally, young peoples' alternatives were very limited. Though technology was on the rise, it had not reached the level where it is today. Cell phones, cable television, internet, video games and other modern technological inventions that compete for attention today were not as pervasive then. Limited car ownership also hampered mobility and therefore hampered the free movement of the young people.

Friends: Friends were limited to only a few because face-to-face encounter was the most common means of communication and interaction between young people. E-mails, social networks, cell phones and text messaging were non-existent. As a result, Church provided a main platform to facilitate these kinds of encounters. Young people attended church to see friends from whom they had been separated from for a long time either because of school or work. Though this provided a wonderful opportunity for the social draw of young people, most churches ignored this felt need. A large portion of this captive audience was lost because the friendship factor was not intentionally taken into account.

Fear: During this time, many young people were greatly motivated to stay in church out of fear (of death, of judgment etc), and many preachers either nurtured or capitalized on this fear for the purpose of proselytizing. The preachers preached sermons with themes of judgement and impending doom for the world. They ended their sermons recounting tragic and frightening stories in order to get positive responses to their appeals for baptism. This fear was programmed into young people to such an extent that some youth could not

even sleep at night fearing that they might die. Many youth were therefore attending baptism and church services because of their fear of imminent death.

Challenges to Today's Youth Ministry

Commenting on the present condition of the youth ministry in North America, Neufield (2002, p. 194) states, "The current state of Youth Ministry can be described as tumultuous, chaotic and confused."

Postmodernism preceded an explosion of advanced technology and increased mobility. These forces pose major challenges that defy and even threaten to paralyze the status-quo of traditional youth ministry (McCorquordale, 2001). Increased mobility has led to a disconnection of conventional frameworks such as family and community structures. Such structures contribute to and influence the development of human relationships, values and expressions. Increased mobility has therefore adversely affected the role assigned to the parents as primary educators and faith formatters of the children.

The nature of the today's education system is also alien to the spiritual dimension of learning. The education processes are based on competition which promotes individual achievement and materialism. Society has also become increasingly multicultural, which brings about new demands for encountering religious diversity in both schools and churches. Youth today demand technical, scientific answers to questions of faith and science (Swartz & Codrington, 2003).

While my generation lacked options, this generation has multiple options; while my generation was forced to attend church, this generation will be pushed further away if they are forced to attend; while the generation of the 90s and before accepted the status quo, the postmodern generation "is characterized by freedom of choice, rejection of creed"

(Swartz & Codrington, 2003) and traditional values. The culture is today desensitized to death compared to preceding ones, and therefore youth have absolutely no fear of death (Kupelian, 2004). These challenges lead to the need for a model that addresses the current challenges facing postmodern youth ministry. The Rational Model answers these challenges.

The Relational Model

The rational model I propose integrates four principles I term "The Four Fs (4Fs) Factor." The undergirding statement of relational youth ministry is that "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Warren, 1995, p. 40). The relational approach focuses first and foremost on building trusting relationships in a non-confrontational way. Leaders seek out young people through common interest as a point of entry. This stands in contrast to the didactic overtone of the traditional approach that leaves very little room for feedback and interaction. The results may not be immediate in the relational approach, but the long-term benefit will prove deeper, stronger and more lasting than the temporary and external achievements from the traditional approach.

The Four Fs approach serves to link all the ingredients that encompass a holistic youth ministry by utilizing the framework of the four components (Faith, Food, Fun, and Fellowship). These factors broaden the scope of the ministry beyond the traditional approach, which is often mainly "program focused."

Faith is an essential factor for young people in this generation, contrary to what their external behaviors and attitudes may indicate. Findings from the National Survey of Youth and Religion show that 65% of adolescents believe in a personal God and 80% pray at least periodically (Smith & Denton, 2005). Another more recent study

identified common traits of Christian American teens. They have a personal story about God they can share, they have a deep connection to a faith community, they have a sense of purpose and they also have a sense of hope about their future (Dean, 2010).

Aaron and Damico, (their real names) are two un-churched youth who were reluctant to attend our recent youth event. One night I asked them, "If we were to do something differently in this program, what would you like that to be?" Aaron responded, "We want more of the church stuff; the games are good, but we need more of the church stuff." Aaron response should make youth ministers cautious expecting that young people want to be entertained, and therefore spending the majority of their ministry resources in this area. These boys' shared experience has shown that they will come to be entertained, but they desire the spiritual and will seek it in other places when it's not found in the church. This young man concluded that without a clear emphasis on faith, our ministry can just be another social club.

Fun: My own experience at my first Andrews University DMin. intensive in 2010 proved to be interestingly enlightening. There, Professor Steve Case, in fulfilment of the prescribed curriculum, engaged us in a series of activities and discourses. I observed that the fun activities the professor implemented made the learning process quite a unique one. The activities such as team games enabled students to gain more knowledge and experiences. I left with a reinforced conviction that effective youth ministries today will be the ones that are prepared to explore pleasurable ways with which to communicate their mission. While fun is not the end to ministry, it is a very important means to that end.

Food: All people like food especially if it is free. Food acts as the fuel for every society. It includes caloric intake for energy, but the

emotional, psychological, and even social elements also merge in food. Food is important! In the American economy, the food marketing system is the second largest advertiser (Gallo, 1999). *Out of Balance* (2005) disclosed that in 2004, food and beverage advertising amounted to some \$11.26 billion. Food is an effective influencer. I have observed that being intentional about serving food at the Friday night youth meetings in my church has attracted a large number of youth. Food draws them to the church, but after coming, they are blessed by the discussions. I have also observed that when food was not served some youth just don't show up; and even those who came, left early. This is the tendency in today's churches who now offer finger food after their services. Food brings people together and creates an opportunity for us to create a lasting impact on the young people.

Fellowship: The importance of young peoples' need for fellowship was made clear to me while serving as a youth director in the East Jamaica Conference in Kingston. The big concern of the church in Jamaica at that time was young people attending movie theatres. Youth flocked to the theatres against the expectation of the church in order to watch the same movies that they already have at home. Why? I came to realize that it was not the movie the young people were going for but they were seeking a place to belong.

I know of churches that have closed their games room, rooms with state-of-the-art games that now only collect dust. What were the reasons for closing? The youth were hanging around the church too late at nights and there was no one to supervise them. At one point we ended up cancelling our basketball competition because the conference had no money to provide accident insurance although there were millions of dollars flowing into evangelistic campaigns. Consequently, the youth gravitate to where the

action is, i.e. the movies houses. It is therefore instructive to us that if we're to realize growth in youth ministry today, we should consider activities that bring youth together in groups.

Biblical Illustration of the Model

This model has a theological foundation in the New Testament as revealed in the teachings and acts of Jesus Christ. The relational model copies the method that Jesus used in his ministry and gives a clear guideline that can be employed by youth ministers today. According to White (1905, p. 143) regarding the earthly ministry of Jesus, "Christ's method alone will give a true success in reaching the people. The saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence then He bade them, "Follow me." If this was Christ's method, then the New Testament is replete with the principles of relational ministry.

For example, Jesus demonstrated relational ministry when he fed 5,000 people with bread and fish. According to Luke 9:10-17, the people's faith in Jesus made them seek for him even to his secret place where He was with His apostles. He further developed their faith in Him by receiving them and speaking to them about the kingdom of God and healing those who were sick. In verse 14, Jesus moved ahead to create a chance for fellowship when He told His apostles to make the people sit down in groups of 50. Jesus demonstrated the place of food in a ministry when he refused the plea by his apostles to let the people go due to their hunger. He instead told the apostles to first give them something to eat. After eating, Jesus involved the people in collecting the remains. Imagine the feeling tone when comparing the leftovers to what they had to start!

Ministry Application (Tested, Tried, & Proven)

In the latter part of August, 2010, in our bid to establish this youth ministry model with a practical application of the 4Fs factors, our church conducted a one-week youth event in Bermuda. Our major objectives were fostering the development of the total person—spiritually, socially and relationally, and to empower them for responsible participation in the life, mission, and work in their community. We organized various activities ranging from electronics games, to table games, to indoor football and basketball. A more structured portion of each evening included a Christian illusionist show, drama presentation, a faith presentation from an invited guest speaker, team activities and small groups interactions. We served food each evening after the initial 40-45 minute game time.

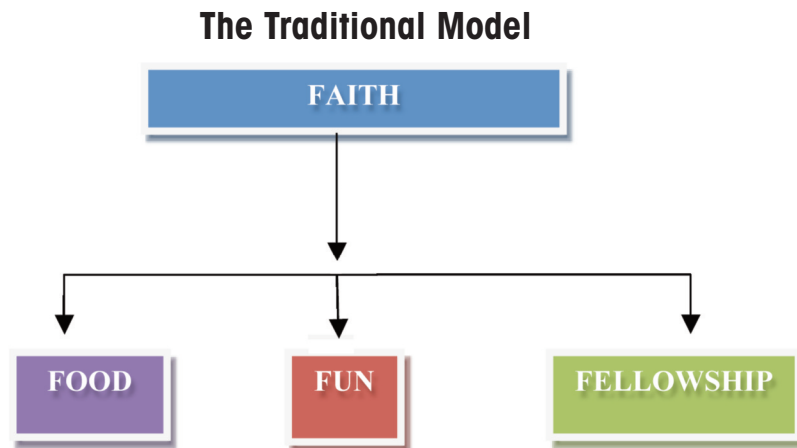
The tremendous transformation that happened in the lives of the youths as they attended the event night after night amazed us. Many young people who were initially reserved and withdrawn became totally involved in the activities, competing in the games, sharing in family group, taking a stand for Jesus, and even volunteering to pray during prayer sessions. The youth were consistently on time and hardly ever missed a session. At the end of the event we had no baptisms—the common measure of success. Nonetheless, we are convinced that it was a success because of the objectives we had with the relational ministry model. This event established new relationships, furnished us with a fresh database of young people that we never had before, and energized an eager group of young people regarding the gathering for youth created by the Church.

Conclusions

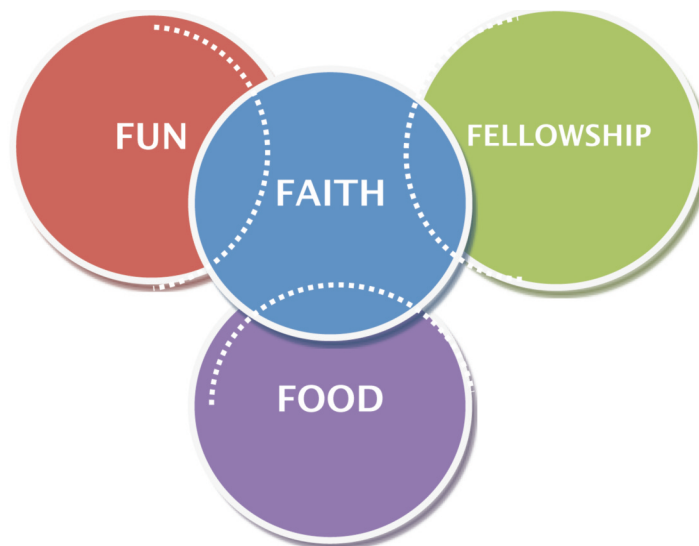
The relational model therefore:

- a) Enables the youths to understand and internalize the need for faith in their lives and to readily practice it.
- b) Eliminates the possibility of misunderstanding between the youth and their ministers. This ensures that their commitment to youth ministry and the other church activities remains strong.
- c) Builds confidence in the youth by instilling the sense of belonging that makes them readily identify with the ministry.
- d) Counters the negative impact that the media would have on youth ministry by providing alternative source of fun to the youths.

Illustration of the Models



The Relational Model with the 4F's Factors



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