

HOW TO INTEGRATE

Teenagers

INTO YOUR CHURCH

A CALL TO ADOPTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY



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The following is an excerpt from my chapter in Adoptive Youth Ministry (editor Chap Clark).

in·te·grate (verb)

- to bring together or incorporate (parts) into a whole

- to give or cause to give equal opportunity and consideration to

(a racial, religious, or ethnic group or a member of such a group)

- to unite or combine

synonyms: merge, unify, fuse, mingle

When I became a youth worker at the youthful age of eighteen, I never thought about the goal of youth ministry being “integration into the whole body of Christ.” In fact, I didn’t dream all that much about teenagers’ faith beyond high school. I dreamed about how they would receive the gift of salvation, impact their high school campus for Christ, discover their spiritual gifts, experience the power of community, and grow in their faith in Jesus Christ. I had lots of dreams for my students, but I honestly didn’t consider what would happen the day after they turned their tassels on graduation day.

It’s funny how dreams change.

Fast-forward nearly a decade. In my pastoral work with teenagers I started noticing a trend (I can be a slow learner). There weren’t nearly as many youth group graduates loving Jesus as there were when they were in the safety of their family and our youth ministry. A brutally painful trend emerged: there was an alarming percentage of youth ministry graduates who were no longer engaged in a local church or passionately following Jesus. These students (who were now emerging adults) whom I loved for years had left their faith somewhere after high school. They were too old for youth groups but hadn’t found their place within a church family; too many of them were no longer following Jesus like they had when they were in our youth ministry.

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Sadly, our church's statistics were not very different from the national statistics. It's common knowledge these days that at least 50 percent of adolescents walk away from faith after high school. Six out of seven high school graduates say they're not prepared for life after high school. For most college bound students, if they don't find a local church to be a part of within two weeks of entering college, it's likely they'll flail in faith for the rest of their college tenure (Fuller Youth Institutes' "Sticky Faith" research captures these realities). The research was mirroring our church's experience.

Something had to change.

First, the implicit, expressed goal needed to be revised. It was no longer enough for droves of students to be a part of our church's program. Success could no longer be defined as x number of students participating in our youth ministry. The goal needed to be defined as students following Jesus for a lifetime.

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We believe it takes a village to raise a child, and that village needs to be much larger than a siloed youth ministry. In order to become a more integrated community, or a family of siblings, the people of God must align with a few core principles.

Adolescents are a part of the family of the church now. If adolescents are a part of the church today—which means siblings with other members—they need opportunities and environments to participate, explore, and experience relationships within the entire church. They need exposure to spaces outside the walls of the youth room. They need to interact with those who have earned their gray hairs, make decisions alongside middle-aged folks, and, of course, join in the changing of babies' diapers. They need a vision and experience of what life and faith look like outside of the confines of their high school boundaries.

Perhaps one of the reasons adolescents don't find themselves a part of the church once they graduate is that they don't really see themselves as a part of the church today. If they only participate in their designated service, in their assigned room, with pre-determined leaders, why should it surprise us when they can't find their way into service, worship, and community beyond their youth group years?

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What if we expanded their vision—and ours!—and included them in the life of Christ, community, and cause no matter their age?

Youth pastors and workers are not the sole experts of adolescents. The professionalization of youth ministry hasn't been an entirely bad thing. However, instead of looking for youth ministries to become the be-all and end-all for students, what if we focused on the developmentally specific actions that only a youth ministry can provide and looked to the whole church to meet other needs of the students? What if our faith community's approach was to provide developmentally specific experiences within an intergenerational context? If our mindset shifted only a few degrees, the long-term trajectory shift would be enormous. Adolescents would be seamlessly integrated into the whole body of Christ without being ignored, displaced, or isolated because of their specific developmental needs.

INTEGRATION IS ABOUT INCREASING THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE WHOLE CHURCH BECAUSE WE DEEPLY LOVE THE YOUNGER GENERATION AND DESIRE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM NOW AND IN THE FUTURE. INTEGRATION IS AFFIRMING THAT WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER THAN WE ARE APART.

I believe youth ministry is critical for the future, but it must be far more integrated and far less segregated if we are to see generations of students rise up to radically love God and his kingdom.

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ACTION STEPS:

- Identify 2-3 specific ways teenagers can integrate into your church this next month.
- Define one developmentally specific experience you could create this next year.
- Invite 3-5 adults to interact with teenagers beyond volunteering in your youth ministry program.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What needs to change within your church so teenagers can integrate more seamlessly?
- Where are teenagers already connecting and integrating within the whole church?
- What developmentally specific experiences is your church already providing?

For more stories, direction, examples, and other perspectives on integration, pick up [Adoptive Youth Ministry](#) or request a copy of my first book, [Redefining the Role of the Youth Worker](#) via www.aprildiaz.com.

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