



A New Kind of Youth Ministry
Copyright © 2007 by Chris Folmsbee

Youth Specialties products, 300 S. Pierce St., El Cajon, CA 92020 are published by Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Folmsbee, Chris.
A new kind of youth ministry / By Chris Folmsbee.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-10: 0-310-26989-X (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-310-26989-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Church work with youth. I. Title.
BV4447.F66 2006
259'.23--dc22

2006024008

This edition printed on acid-free paper.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

Creative Team: Doug Davidson, Brad Taylor, Heather Haggerty, Mark Novelli/IMAGO MEDIA

Cover Design by Toolbox Studios

Printed in the United States of America



CONTENTS

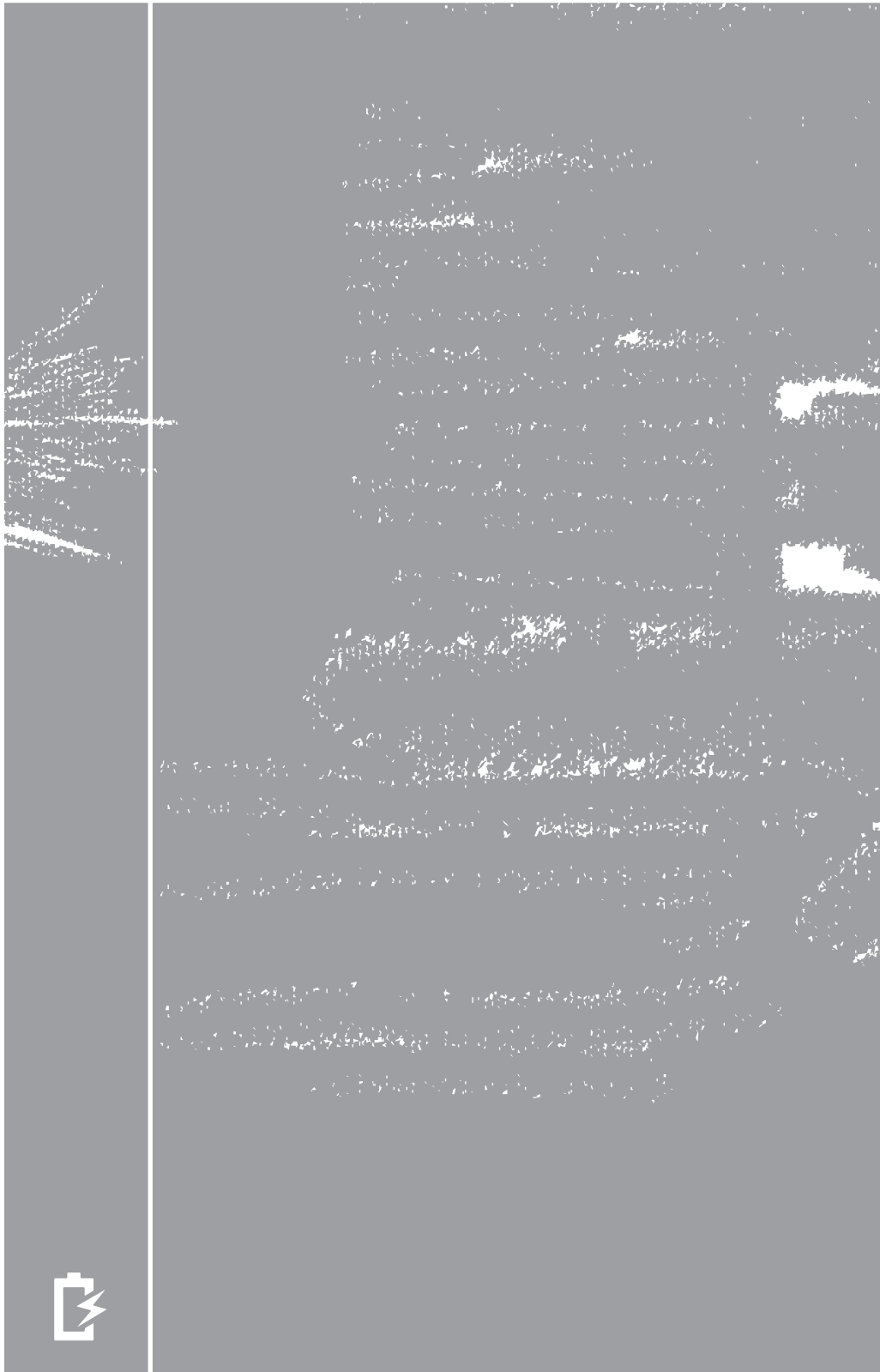
Foreword by Brian McLaren		6
Preface		9
Introduction	My Journey toward a New Kind of Youth Ministry	11
Chapter 1	Reculturing Evangelism	23
	From Carnivals and Bridges to Sharing the Journey	
Chapter 2	Reculturing Discipleship	37
	From Learning <i>about</i> God to Living <i>for</i> God	
Chapter 3	Reculturing Service and Outreach	55
	From Meeting Others' Needs to Living amidst Their Need	
Chapter 4	Reculturing Student Leadership	71
	From a Few Leaders to a Community of Contributors	
Chapter 5	Reculturing Mission	83
	From Taking Trips to Living Missionally	
Chapter 6	Reculturing Leadership	99
	From Going It Alone to Ministry Partnerships	
Chapter 7	Reculturing Education	113
	From Teacher-Centered Curricula to Learner-Centered Environments	
Chapter 8	Reculturing Ourselves	127
	The Youth Worker's Journey of Personal Transformation	
Chapter 9	Making It Happen	147
	How Do We Get from Old to New?	

1

RE CULTURING EVANGELISM

From Carnivals and Bridges to Sharing the Journey





A few years ago, a well-known evangelist rolled into Minnesota's Twin Cities for a two-day evangelistic rally designed to reach teenagers for Christ. The event was a blend of concerts, extreme sports, junk food, t-shirt stands, and a series of gospel messages all in a carnival-like atmosphere.

I remember strolling with a colleague and friend through the capitol grounds in downtown St. Paul where the event was being held. We agreed that things looked rather positive. We saw thousands of people having a good time—interacting with one another, playing games, eating, and buying t-shirts with stupid sayings on them. There were lots of families hanging out together, which is always a cool thing to see. And there was a part of each of us that wished we had taken more of a leadership role in the planning and organization of the event, as we'd been invited to do nearly a year earlier.

But the other part of us was incredibly glad we hadn't taken a leadership role. It wasn't just that our joining the leadership team would have meant expending excessive amounts of time, energy, and effort to make the event happen—although that was certainly true. The primary reason we were glad we hadn't taken a larger role in this event was because that would have communicated to the rest of the leadership team and the wider evangelical church community that we considered event evangelism to be effective in revealing the kingdom of God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As we continued to reflect after returning home from the event, my friend Tony and I realized that the part within each of us that wished we'd taken a leadership role on the task force was the self-seeking part. It was the part of us that covets the applause for big things getting accomplished. Do you ever do things for that reason?

It's not that I don't believe the event was good for the city. It was good because it brought short-term jobs to people and revenue to the local businesses. It was good because Christians

poured into the downtown area where many of them confronted (perhaps for the first time) the thousands of homeless people living there. It was also good because hundreds of church people were able to rally around a common ambition, and a sense of partnership was established among churches in the metro area. And it was also good because people heard about Jesus from a very good communicator and a snapshot of Jesus' story was told on local news stations. By and large, I think the event was good. But was it effective in its goal of making new disciples? I am not too sure about that.

I wonder how many of the counted "conversions" at this event were genuine. I wonder if all the time spent was worth it. I still speculate with friends about what other things might have been done with the thousands of dollars spent to pull the event off. So many of the students and parents I talked with thought the event was a great experience. They got a thrill seeing the best Christian skaters in the nation do their thing and hearing some mediocre Christian musicians act like superstars. But few of them invited any of their not-yet-believing friends, neighbors, coworkers, teammates, or relatives to join them.

All of which causes me to ask questions like: Should we put our efforts into event evangelism any longer? Do people who are not-yet believers even come to our events? Do Christians even invite not-yet believers to attend? Considering all the time, money, and effort spent on event evangelism, how much is really accomplished?

While driving through southern Georgia recently, I saw a series of billboards advertising a "Mega-Revival." The billboards stated a desire to see "thousands of youth from southern Georgia" united together to see the "magical illusions" of a magician I'd never heard of. (I'm sure he had a huge bag of tricks...) Of course, the billboards also featured another guy who appeared to be a preacher (chubby face, glasses, mustache, slicked-back hair, and sweat dripping down the side of his brow) who was going to share with

these thousands of youth a “once and for all” story that could give them “life forever.”

Most youth ministries in North America favor a more relational and personal method of evangelism over this mass revival style. Rightly so, I contend. We have learned that students in many of our contexts need a connection to the gospel being proclaimed—and that connection needs to be real and relational. For many ministries, that has meant primarily a combination of friendship evangelism and event evangelism.

This is a model I followed through much of my own ministry over the last decade. I’ve emphasized the importance of providing “strategic exposure” for the not-yet-believing students in our communities. The idea behind “strategic exposure” events is quite simple. We challenge students to bring *their* friends to an event that we plan, organize, and pay for. We always assure our students that the event will not humiliate or embarrass them in any way. Such events are usually built around a theme designed to attract and entertain students from all walks of life, such as themes built around sports, holidays, movies, or music.

We sought to plan events that would include: 1) an engaging activity (such as a movie, a competition, a race, or a horror house); 2) a talk that plants the gospel message in the minds and (hopefully) hearts of the youth; and 3) a chance to discuss that gospel message around some kind of food. In theory, this method of combining friendship evangelism and

THE MUSTARD SEED JAM HOUSE

Rob Thrasher

www.myspace.com/mustardseedjamhouse

The Mustard Seed Jam House is a coffeehouse ministry run by Downtown Ministries in Greenville, Pennsylvania, about two hours north of Pittsburgh. Rob Thrasher runs the coffeehouse ministry, which hosts concerts every Thursday and Saturday night, featuring a wide range of Christian bands. Rob’s passion is to use music as the channel for connecting with the hurting, confused, seeking, and skeptical students of Greenville. Through conversation, coffee, and quality music, Rob and his volunteer team seek to encourage students to begin the journey with Jesus by developing lasting relationships characterized by the “hide-nothing, tell-everything, share-anything” mindset of life-dynamic evangelism.

event evangelism works. Students from all walks of life—jocks, gear-heads, nerds, greenies, and geeks are all welcome. And sometimes they come.

We normally consider these events a success if youth bring their not-yet-believing friends and their friends have a good time. If those visitors come back and participate in retreats and other church-based events then you are right on. Success!—especially if a few of the students “cross the line” from unbelief to belief along the way and become Christians, right? And even better if the senior pastor mentions those decisions during the service the following Sunday. That is the true measure of success, right?

Maybe. But after ten years of leading events like this, I’m not at all convinced that they are effective. I have witnessed thousands of students coming to events and just as many students who are excited to share their faith. These events were a doorway into the church for some young people who later decided to explore the faith and are now following Jesus. I don’t doubt that at all. Most of those who have made a decision to follow Christ at our events became involved in our ministries in an ongoing way. So what’s the problem? Well, there are several:

- 1) The students who graduate from our ministries know how to do evangelism only in the context of an event we have planned, organized, and paid for. We’ve never really modeled for them what it means to make disciples and invite and welcome people to follow Jesus.
- 2) Most of the students have relied on someone else to communicate the gospel. Even though we’ve raised up a few young emerging servants who are capable and passionate enough to share their connection story at an outreach event, we leave the majority of our students ill-equipped to share their faith.
- 3) This method of evangelism, the event/friendship combination, allows students to act in ways that are not at all Christ-

- like outside these events, yet still feel they are honoring God by bringing friends to these events. Since students are obedient to that aspect of the Great Commission, they feel as though they are doing what a Christian is supposed to do. They never really face the challenge and discomfort of someone finding out how they really live with and love others.
- 4) Typically, youth ministries measure these events by the number of participants or the number of salvation prayers spoken. This unfortunate but common greed-producing fallacy pushes youth ministries to continually try to do more and more in order to get bigger and bigger. We end up living like “human doings” instead of human beings.
 - 5) Students who have made a genuine commitment to submit their lives to Christ at these events are seldom followed up on and discipled. Most ministries just absorb the newbie into their existing discipleship-oriented programs and never offer specific help to the new Christian embarking on a journey of spiritual growth and discovery. We know the importance of discipling new believers, but let’s be honest: True discipleship is not happening enough, is it?
 - 6) In this model, we leaders are not held accountable for our own commitment to evangelism. In other words, students rarely if ever see evangelism modeled by their leaders. The planning and organizing of events can become the only “evangelism” we do.
 - 7) The more events we plan and organize, the harder it is to break free from their gripping demands later down the road. And those pressing demands leave little space for recultur-ing—especially if your volunteer youth leaders, students, and the leadership of the church view the continual offering of more and more events as healthy. Most churches operate under the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mentality. This can make it extremely difficult to adjust to meet the spiritual needs of future generations.

I'm sure there are youth ministries in North America and elsewhere around the globe that are effectively reaching students for Christ using this combined event/friendship method of evangelism. But I tend to think the ministries that use this method effectively are few and far between.

BUILDING BRIDGES?

A lot of youth ministries killed event evangelism a long time ago and now focus entirely on a friendship evangelism method. And there's a lot to be said for this. It calls for Christian students to build bridges between themselves and their friends who are outside the church. This bridge is usually built on a common interest such as sports, academics, goals and dreams, family backgrounds, or employment. This bridge connects believing students with not-yet-believing students for the sole purpose of leading those not-yet-believing students to Christ. Friendship evangelism calls students to live like Jesus in the context of their relationships and care for their friends in a Good Samaritan kind of way.

I love bridges. My favorite bridge is a foot-and-bicycle bridge that Leonardo da Vinci designed 500 years ago. This bridge was recently built in Norway, after it had long been deemed impossible to build. One of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen was when I was on a plane taking off from the San Francisco airport early one morning and my eye caught the Golden Gate Bridge rising through the top of the morning fog. When I was attending college in New York, I used to stare at the Tappan Zee Bridge from my dorm room. There are a number of covered bridges across New England that my wife and I would stop the car and get out for. I love bridges.

I hate the analogy of bridge-building when we talk about evangelism, though. A bridge connects two places or points that are otherwise unable to connect. So what does it reveal when the church needs to build a bridge into the culture? It reveals a disconnection—a large separation between the culture and the church. On a more personal level it reveals a large separation between those

who follow Christ and the not-yet-believing. But how long are the bridges we are building? How far are we from those in our lives who have not made a commitment to Christ?

A new kind of youth ministry is not about building bridges. It's not about constructing some artificial connection to others in a distant land. A new kind of youth ministry is committed to time and proximity. It means getting into the canoe and crossing the "waterways of life" together, in community, with your sphere of relations.

Obviously, there are many methods of evangelism. Some are effective for a season and then become irrelevant; others have been part of the fabric of the church for many years. You and your youth ministry may be using a method totally unlike the event or friendship methods. Maybe you are using the seeker small group method or the Sunday school method or the summer camp/retreat method. That's fine. It's up to you to decide what methods are best in your particular ministry context. As long as the gospel message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are being proclaimed and lived out effectively in your context, then do what you have to do. But if you aren't sure that your evangelism methods are effective, it may be time to re-culture. It may be time for you to critically assess your current methods and incorporate new ideas and practices to see more students engage with Jesus.

EPIC MINISTRIES

Dan Schuster/Merlin Bartel
www.epicmx.com

Based in Calgary, Alberta, Epic Ministries seeks to mobilize the MX generations for Christ. Epic seeks to practice life-dynamic evangelism through house churches, worship experiences, and a downtown outreach center called The Urban Monastery. They have been known to host all-night prayer vigils at the Urban Monastery, as well as feeding the hungry and serving the homeless. They also encourage the people of their faith community to live missionally through the hosting/participation of their house churches, which are created to "gather with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will show up" and to "connect hearts and trust God to show us how to live in community."

THE HEART AND SOUL OF EVANGELISM

If we are going to effectively lead not-yet-believing students into a relationship with God through Jesus, I don't think it will be through the efforts of event evangelism or even friendship evangelism as we currently understand it. Instead, it will be through calling our students and leaders to a commitment of *life-dynamic evangelism*.

If you and I are going to join God in his global movement of transformation, we must do it through the moments of life that each of us experience and live. A life-dynamic approach to evangelism involves sharing the truths of God in the context of our everyday lives. It involves each of us connecting our heart and soul with the hearts and souls of those within our sphere of relations. It is faith sharing through the cycle of situations and circumstances we share with those in our world. It is an explanation of our faith both verbally and in our actions as the events of our lives unfold.

Life-dynamic faith sharing is authentic. It is a hide-nothing, tell-everything, and share-anything mindset that seeks to echo Christ's life and shine some light into the darkness of our world. Life-dynamic evangelism is not about *them* and *us*. It is not about *other* people or the people *out there*. Life-dynamic evangelism is about seeing people as *people*. Life-dynamic evangelism doesn't need bridges—just committed people who love God and others so much that their entire lives become missionally connected to God's plan to use us, the church, to join him in restoring the world.

Consider the following characteristics of life-dynamic evangelism:

- 1) Life-dynamic evangelism involves sharing our lived faith with those around us in the midst of the continuous change, activity, and progress of our lives.
- 2) It requires living in community with people who are not yet followers of Christ. This means being seen as Jesus-like, a friend of sinners.

- 3) It requires the wisdom, humility, and honesty to open our lives to others, including the elements of fear, doubt, and confusion that are part of our own journeys of faith.
- 4) It is faith sharing as Jesus did. It is about allowing others to join us in our journey, discover the truth, and then allowing them to come to their own decisions and understandings about following Christ.
- 5) It means allowing not-yet-believing people to speak into our lives and impart their own wisdom, knowledge, and skill. Are Christ-followers the only ones who can help you move through the trials of your life?
- 6) It is the faithful sharing of the story we find ourselves in *now*, not the story of our conversion *then*. Of course, the moment you accepted Christ is essential. But what is your story like now? Are you living a God-honoring life today? If so, invite others to share the journey with you. And if you are struggling, invite others to share that part of the journey with you. That's the point. It's about now. It's about authenticity—so let's take off our masks.
- 7) Life-dynamic evangelism is not just about a single occurrence like a special event or a friend-level act of service. It is about immersing ourselves in something way bigger than any of us—God's restorative plan.
- 8) It is not necessarily about a high volume of people. It is about the two or three people who are closest to you and do not yet know Christ—people for whom you can be Christ in a genuine way.
- 9) It does not come exclusively from a commitment to the Great Commission. It flows also out of a Great Commandment love of God and a love for people.
- 10) It is living your faith, not just talking about it.

In an age of certain change manifesting itself in uncertain ways, life-dynamic evangelism has great potential to reach the distrustfully curious and the faithfully skeptical. I believe it is essential for youth pastors to begin developing and implementing a ministry culture that allows students to better understand how they might be Jesus to their family, friends, and the wider community.

I can't offer you a step-by-step plan to follow in reculturing your own evangelism ministry. As the chief architect of your ministry, you are the one who best knows what suits your own context. But in seeking to foster a new kind of evangelism, you'll want to focus on equipping students so they can use both major and trivial events in their lives as opportunities to engage with the people around them. This means continuing to train students theologically—but with an emphasis on practicing their faith, rather than simply believing all the right things. Emphasis would also be placed on developing practical relationship-building skills such as listening, sharing, caring, and communicating for the purpose of deepening the sense of community.

Your recultured evangelism would be driven by the goal of connecting students with God through Jesus, not packing a calendar full of events for the purpose of appearing active. Youth events would be understood primarily as gatherings where life-dynamic evangelism can take place, rather than the events themselves serving as the evangelism method.

Rethinking our evangelism approach also means providing space for students who are still exploring their faith to participate in certain roles that have too long been reserved “for believers only.” These might include participating on the worship team, attending discipleship-oriented retreats, and traveling with mission teams. In this “play before you pay” era, students must be given the chance to belong before they believe.

Ministries oriented around life-dynamic evangelism require paid and volunteer leaders who model this method of evangelism on a regular basis. Students can't just see the adults leading their minis-

tries as event organizers. They must also see us as people who live in ways that reveal the kingdom of God to all those around us.

Our evangelism design will require constant reculturing to remain relevant and accessible. We must be speaking the language of an emerging culture, and those immersed in that culture must perceive our ministries as near to their heart. We must dare to reculture in the midst of the tensions surrounding programming, tradition, and skepticism. But if we are going to make an impact in our world, moving in the direction of life-dynamic evangelism is not just an option, but a necessity.

After over a decade of planning and executing outreach events, I can honestly say we've seen more students come to Jesus through relationships and one-on-one life sharing than through any entertaining event or flashy program. Such events may wow your students for a while, but it's the hard work of relational evangelism and sharing in God's mission to restore the world that brings about God's desired outcome of missional living—people proclaiming and living out God's epic story.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- What method of evangelism do you and your team use currently? Is it working? Are students meeting Jesus and choosing to follow him? Are you welcoming new believers into your ministry?
- How well is your ministry equipping students to share and show Jesus? What can you do better?
- How can you teach life-dynamic evangelism and structure your ministry to better encourage it?
- Are you and your other adult leaders modeling life-dynamic evangelism?