

**Skip Masback
Lecture Manuscript
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**The Death of “Default” Youth Ministry:
And the Rebirth of a Transformative Youth Ministry of Human Flourishing**

I. Introduction

About a hundred years ago, when I was first called into ministry, I took over a small youth group as part of my responsibilities. It was a fine group, but frequent leadership turnover had caused a breakdown in articulated mission, institutional memory, and received traditions.

Every week I came home from teaching adult Bible study on Wednesday night and tried to figure out what in the world I could pull together for the youth group meeting on Sunday. I’d try to get a flyer out and a paragraph in the church bulletin by Friday, run out to get whatever supplies I needed after helping to lead worship on Sunday morning, and scramble to pull off the youth group program that night.

You might say I was leading a “default youth ministry.” It was a “default youth ministry” because I presumed the parents and their kids would support the program because that’s just what good Christian families do. And it was a “default youth ministry” because, in the absence of any clear vision or mission, I just defaulted to a series of random programs – the ones I remembered from my

childhood youth group, or the ones the kids happened to remember from past years, or the ones in a Youth Specialties handbook that looked like they might work with our kids.

Now, I won't embarrass you by asking how many of you are running "default youth ministries" - maybe you're a volunteer with little support, or an associate minister with too many other responsibilities, or maybe, like me, you're new to a church that has been through three youth ministers in as many years.

And it wouldn't even be a problem worth taking your time with if our youth ministries were uniformly vibrant and transformative and our children uniformly faithful, joyful and flourishing. But you and I know that too few of them are. So, the conviction that underlies our lecture tonight, indeed, the conviction that underlies this entire three-year series of lectures is that in an age of exhausted parents and overextended kids, default youth ministry is doomed.

This conviction and belief crystalized for me during the very first lecture the Yale Youth Ministry Institute sponsored back in 2012. Theologian Andy Root asked the assembled youth ministers about their biggest challenges. I'm paraphrasing here, but basically Andy said, "You might not want to say it out loud, but, hey, don't most youth ministers complain that one of their biggest challenges is the parents?"

As the nods spread around the room, Andy continued, “and why are parents a challenge? Come on, you know why; it’s because they won’t help us out! We’re trying to get their kids to come to youth group, and the parents aren’t supporting us.” More nods.

“Oh,” he said, “the parents say they want their kids to go youth group, but just not this week because they’ve got soccer practice, and just not next week because they’re in the school play, and just not the week after that because they’ve got SAT Prep classes, or AP exams, or piano lessons, or a paper due, or a dance recital.”

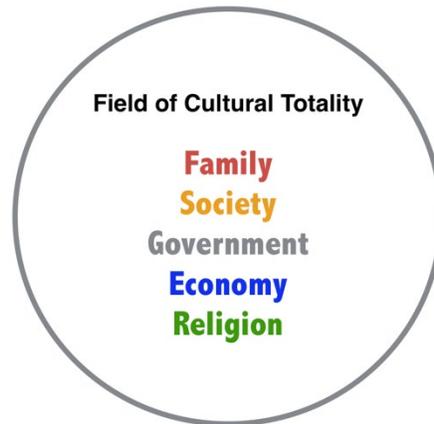
Now the youth ministers were chuckling in recognition, and Andy raised the stakes. “And why won’t the parents help us out? Just why is youth ministry so low on the family priority list?”

Andy had the audience leaning in waiting for the answer we all knew was coming: a punch line nailing the parents as lukewarm Christians, or superficial in their love of Church, or hypocritical in their discipleship.

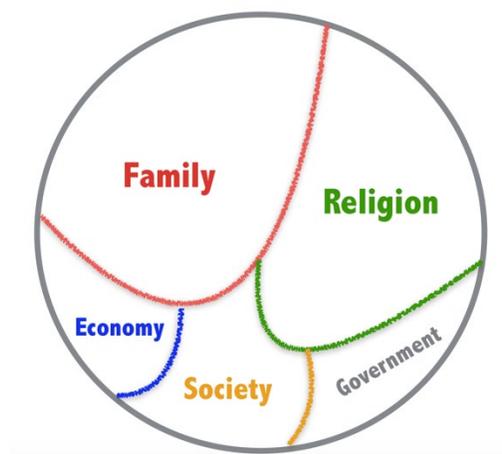
But instead of landing the expected punch line, Andy paused, lowered his voice, and said, “I think they have these priorities because they love their kids. They love their kids.”

Andy’s argument went something like this: Anthropologists tell us that all cultures across time and space have five spheres that organize life. The categories

might look radically different across cultures, but every culture has something called family, something called religion, something called society, something called government, and something called economy.



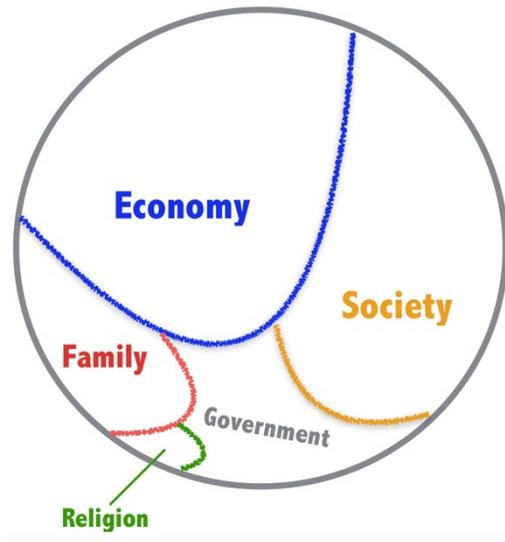
Imagine the 1701 culture of Connecticut as a map; and then imagine each of these categories as a continent on that map. If the size of each continent corresponded to the cultural importance of that category, then the map might have looked something like this:



The continent representing family would have been huge. It organized almost every activity of life from child rearing to education, to labor to sustenance.

And the category of religion would have been huge: in 1701, Connecticut was a theocracy. Church was at the center of village life, and most folks looked to religion as the source of cosmological, ethical, historical and even scientific truth. On the other hand, the larger society was relatively unimportant; government was small and remote; and professional credentials and economic activity beyond subsistence were irrelevant to most.

Fast forward to 2018 and this map has radically changed. Now the cultural value accorded religion has shriveled to a small island at the periphery of most lives, and family has shrunk considerably – a high school kid charges out of the home at 7:00 in the morning to spend the day in a governmental institution we call a school, stays after school for extracurricular activities or goes off to a part time job, comes home around 6:30, races through a quick meal, and then runs to their room to work on homework and plug into their social media apps or video games. Government, on the other hand is dramatically larger, and the economy and focus on professional credentials is enormous.



Why are parents giving higher priorities to all-state sports, AP classes, and SAT prep courses? Because they're reading this map. On this map, the cultural value accorded being in a youth group is de minimis. The cultural esteem accorded academic excellence and extracurricular achievements is huge. If Susie performs excellently at these, she'll get into a good college. And if she if she gets into a good college, she can get a good job. And if she gets a good job she might excel where this culture says it really counts – in achieving economic success or political power.

A “default” style youth ministry was probably never a faithful or adequate or response to God’s call to care for our kids, but as long as parents are reading this map, it’s doomed. Tell parents they should bring their kids to youth group because they’ll have fun playing games, and the parents will just smile. Of course they want their kids to have fun – there just isn’t time. Tell the parents that the kids will

learn the 23rd Psalm and recite it on Youth Sunday, and they'll figure that's the kind of cultural literacy that Religion 101 should provide. Tell the parents that encouraging the kids will make it more likely that they'll join your church, and the parents will decide that the remote prospect of church membership in your church is not worth sacrificing their child's chance for cultural success.

Ask a parent what they most want for their children, and they're likely to say they just want their children to be happy. And there's nothing wrong with that aspiration. The problem results from them buying into the culture's maladaptive vision of the path to that happiness. Too often the prescribed path is to help the child "find" themselves; to help them establish an identity that energizes performance; to support that performance and the drive for recognition; and to help them convert that recognition into college admission, professional esteem and compensation.

Our goal in youth ministry shouldn't be to criticize parents for wanting their children to be happy, our goal should be to proclaim a God who wants their children to have a deeper joy, a more resilient life, a firmer foundation for flourishing than they can even imagine. Our goal should be to proclaim a Christ who came that their children may "have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10). In the words of St. Paul, our goal should be to offer them a youth group that

articulates and enacts a compelling vision of equipping their kids to “take hold of the life that really is life.” (1 Timothy 6:19)

I want to close this introduction by sharing the story of two brothers who were in our youth group. They were eating dinner with their Mom after the first full school day after their mission trip. Their mom was struggling to understand what this mission trip stuff is all about and why it’s so powerful. This is what they said.

“Mom, we now understand that there is another way to live. There is an easier, happier, more loving way to live where every person accepts each other without question, supports one another without condition, and puts others’ needs before their own.¹ We have experienced so much love, and we now know that the love we have experienced is God’s presence among us.”

“It was so different, and so hard back at school today. Our teacher was shouting and criticizing and putting down the whole class. We went up to her after the class and told her that there is another way to live; it doesn’t have to be this way. We told her we had just spent a week serving in the rain. For that whole week no one yelled at us, nagged us, or put us down even once. We just loved and

¹ From Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, quoted in George Brandl, ed., *The Religious Experience* (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 919: “It is more ‘natural’ for us to be ‘out of ourselves’ and carried freely and entirely towards the ‘Other’—toward God in Himself or in other men—than it is for us to be centered and enclosed in ourselves.”

supported one another, and we succeeded at every challenge set before us. Our teacher looked at us, and then she began to nod, and then her eyes filled up with tears, and then she began to smile, and then she said we were right. She said she would try really hard to teach differently tomorrow.”²

² Thus Stanley Grenz: “The best apologetic we have in the postmodern context is the vibrant, local community of disciples who are loyal to Christ, that is, a community in which the power of the spirit is transforming relationships. . . . postmodern persons are converted to the community before they are converted to Christ.” “Next-Wave Interview with Stanley Grenz,” 20 April 1999, available at <http://www.next-wave.org/may99/SG.htm>. Paul Tillich observed similarly: “The Church’s task is to introduce each new generation into the reality of the Spiritual Community, into its faith, and into its love.” *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).