

Why We Do What We Do and Don't Do What We Don't Do

Illustration:

We plan to implement some significant changes around here that we hope will result in the growth of our church.

First we're going to add a coffee shop to the Lobby that will open for an hour before and after services.

Next we're going to begin offering a Saturday evening service as an option for the Sunday morning service so that folks can sleep in or families can have a day together.

We're going to begin a Wednesday night Christian Pilates workout in the Yearick Center followed by a Scripture meditation and prayer.

One Sunday night per month will be movie night. At the end of the movie Pastor Conley will be discussing the redemptive theme of the movie, and helping you learn how to engage your co-workers in dialogue in order to speak the gospel to them. (Child care will be provided when the movie selected is only appropriate for more mature audiences.)

- Of course I'm being ridiculous, but many churches think, "If we can just get them here, then the good stuff will happen. The ultimate good is that people like coming to church."
- Bill Hybels of Willow Creek acknowledged that they tried it and it didn't work.
- None of these things are bad, but they aren't what the church is given the responsibility to do.
- We could be moving at mind-numbing speed through events and activities, all the while thinking that we are doing something spiritually meritorious.
- Most of us agree that a church shouldn't operate this way, but we do not all agree that a youth ministry shouldn't operate this way. Because many think/say things like:
 - Make things big and fun and the good stuff will happen while they're there.
 - This is a critical time in the life of my child, so please make sure you have lots of activities.
 - Please consider doing "X" because my child doesn't like "Y".
- What we would decry in a church as a whole, we would endorse in a youth ministry.

This morning, it's my desire to discuss "Why we do what we do and why we don't do what we don't do" in the HPBC Youth Ministry.

It is helpful for us to be aware of several things as we approach this topic. We need to be prepared to combat several ways of thinking:

1. Experientialism – This is how everyone else is doing it and we've never seen it done any other way.
2. Pragmatism – This works (or seems to).
3. Defeatism – We're losing the fight, so we may as well do whatever is necessary to keep them in church.

I'm starting with the presupposition that Scripture has given us a way to disciple our children. Theology informs and shapes my philosophy which drives my methodology. To some degree we'll talk about all three today, but we'll focus primarily on philosophy and methodology. (I preached a sermon focusing on the theology of what we're doing. It's posted on the website.) Philosophy: Why we do what we do.

1. Primacy of parents

- Deuteronomy 6 to Ephesians 6, the Bible makes it clear: fathers and mothers must own up to the responsibility of rearing God-saturated children. Moses commanded Israel to "teach them [God's words] diligently to . . . [their] children" (Deut. 6:7). And lest the community should think that all of the adults were primarily responsible for teaching all of the children, Moses added, "Talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (6:7). While there was a general community obligation to the next generation, Moses indisputably laid the primary responsibility on the adults in the home, namely, the parents. Paul expressed it similarly in Ephesians 6. The apostle admonished parents to "bring [their children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (v. 4). He directed the command specifically to the fathers, not because mothers are relieved of the duty, but because fathers are the "heads of households on whom the ultimate responsibility for supervision rests" (D. Edmund Hiebert, *Ephesians*, p. 108). If there were a time when

Paul could have placed the primary responsibility on local churches for the discipleship of the next generation; it would have been in this great letter on the church. But the apostle affirms the teaching of Moses: parents—and especially fathers—are primarily responsible.”¹

- “The position of youth pastor may be helpful but isn’t necessary for the discipleship of the coming generation. Having parents who are committed to the glory of God is.”²
- This is why almost everything we do is for teens and parents.
- My desire is to turn the hearts of the children to their parents.

2. The church is secondary, but no less necessary.

- My desire is to “assist families in the discipling of youth and young adults to the end that they might be obsessed with the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”
- As Eph. 4 puts it, I want them to “grow up into Christ.”
- I want them to see our Christianity and want our Christ.
- There are different “ways” churches handle youth ministry.
 - i. I want to connect our teens to God.
 - ii. One youth pastor writes:

The recent *New York Times* article, “[Evangelicals Fear the Loss of Their Teenagers](#),” has stirred up a great deal of conversation among fundamentalists and evangelicals alike. While the article focused on broader Evangelicalism, many fundamentalists are wrestling with the same phenomenon. Upon graduation from high school, far too many teenagers follow the call of the wild, drift away from the church, and (in some cases) repudiate their faith in Christ.

There is a sense in which this development should not be surprising at all. Since World War II, youth ministry in the United States has taken on a life of its own. Parachurch organizations were founded to focus on evangelizing and serving teenagers. Pastoral positions were created for the sole purpose of meeting the needs of high school students. And the Christian school movement has deluded some parents into thinking that their children’s academic environment will inevitably produce a disciple of Christ.

Such things as these are not inherently evil. But their proliferation over the last half-century has unwittingly taught our children a destructive notion: the church exists for them. For the first 18 years of their lives, we tailor an unending succession of programs and events to cater to them. We entice them to come to church activities by telling them what they will get out of it. We create competitions based on spiritual things—Bible memory, sword drills, even personal devotional time—hoping that somehow God’s Word might lodge in their hearts. None of these things is inherently sinful, but taken together they give young people the impression that the church revolves around them. Even the phrase *youth ministry* implicitly teaches them to view themselves fundamentally as the *objects* of service.

Once teenagers graduate from high school, however, they are suddenly confronted with a church that no longer revolves around them. We explain to these young adults that God expects them to serve others and not themselves. But for years, our example has taught them that the church exists for them. So when the church stops meeting their perceived needs—when the church stops existing for them—they have no reason to stick around.

Our discussion must transcend simply answering the question, “How do we get them to stay?” If that is all we do, then we may think that the solution is either to remake the rest of the church so that it would continue to exist for them (a strategy that surely is being tried in various quarters) or simply to create more service opportunities at increasingly younger ages. But neither of these strategies addresses the heart of the matter, for both are horizontal answers to an essentially vertical question. The problem is not primarily the loss of recent high school graduates. The drop-off between high school and young adulthood is symptomatic of a much bigger issue: a failure to teach the centrality of God in all

¹ From Matthew Hoskinson’s article, “[The Primacy of Parents in Youth Discipleship](#)”

² From Matthew Hoskinson’s article, “[The Primacy of Parents in Youth Discipleship](#)”

things and to demonstrate the centrality of God in our youth discipleship. Nothing exists for them—or for us, for that matter. All of life is all about God.³

What we do and why:

1. Small Groups

- This gets them used to discussing spiritual things with their peers.
- I'll be preparing a handout each Monday and e-mailing it to each of you by Tuesday evening. In the youth ministry we are expecting your children to come each week having listened to and taken some form of notes on the previous weeks sermon.
- You must make your children take notes. (You make them do all sorts of other things: brush teeth, go to school, do homework, eat vegetables, etc.) You must be taking notes. Pastor gives us an amazing amount to meditate on in his sermons. How many of us can recall the basic ideas presented in last Sunday's sermon?
- My desire is to teach our kids to be doers of the Word. They must learn how to listen to a sermon and then begin asking the right questions and making accurate applications. We're trying to help them in this endeavor.
- In two weeks we'll be having several weeks of "open house" in Sunday School, so that you can come and see what we're doing.

2. SNACK

- In an effort to teach our teens what true "koinonia" is, we've established the "Sunday Night After Church Koinonia."

3. Prayer Meetings

- Luther had prayer meetings with kids only in order to lock out the faithlessness of adults.
- These teens can and must see that God is real and He answers prayer, and that they are part of the body of Christ at HP and they should pray.

4. Mercy Ministries

- To serve and minister to the body in order to build it up.
- James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
- Gal 6:10 As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

5. Other "activities"

- I'm looking for activities that accomplish something. I want them to provide opportunity for genuine fellowship and conversation. I want them to be in an environment that I don't have to worry about Satan eating them for lunch. I want them to grow friendships, and build unity. I want there to be some Biblical intentionality to what we're doing.
 - i. Canoe trips
 - ii. Overnight Campouts
 - iii. Camp
 - iv. Occasional activities
- I understand that this is very different than what a lot of churches (even within conservative fundamentalism) have done. But it only takes 6 years. As 7th graders come into a youth ministry where they are expected to listen to preaching, come to prayer meetings, minister to the body of Christ, display the unity that Christ has accomplished for them, discuss God's working in their life with their peers, etc., they will grow into it and within 6 years the youth ministry can be totally different.
- Just so you know that I'm not some maverick seeking to do something novel for attention. There are 4 other youth pastors in Greenville that I meet with regularly and we discuss these very issues. I've been amazed at the overall unanimity that we have. (So if you're going to pull your kid out of HP to take them

³ From Matthew Hoskinson's, "[The Role of the Church in Youth Discipleship](#)"

somewhere more exciting, you'll need to jump into evangelicalism, but many of them are already ahead of us in this area.)

What we do not do:

1. Wed. Night Youth Group
 - My desire is to connect our teens to the church body, not a sub-church. It would be easy and fun to have a youth room with games, teen songs, teen dress code, teen style, teen speaker. The problem is – I can't justify it Biblically. I think the value of intergenerational contact is essential. The Bible says that the older are to teach the younger. That can't happen if we separate the teens out on the only night that they have opportunity to mix with others.
2. Lots of big activities
 - What we win them with, we win them to.
 - Our kids don't need more opportunities to play together.
 - One teen in our youth group estimated he and his friends played video games 40 hours per week.
 - Heb 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. I'm motivated by the truth that I will give an account for how I've watched for the souls of your children. I don't want to be the Pied Piper that kept your kids happy and entertained at church as they went to Hell.
 - God has given the church shepherds, not activities directors.
 - We can do immeasurable harm by getting teens to enjoy coming to church, but not love God.
 - In the past month I've counseled teens in our church and school who are seriously wrestling with their salvation, drinking and inappropriate physical lifestyles, abuse (all of these are 10th grade and below). These take time, and as a human – I've only got a certain amount of it. I can't keep the schedule full of crazy stuff while discipling the young men, counseling these serious issues, studying for speaking and preaching, and being a husband and father.
 - It is my desire that activities be relationally orchestrated and not pastorally driven. If your child would like to do a paintball activity – mom or dad – this is the perfect opportunity for you to jump in and say, "Hey, let's invite a bunch of your friends to go play and then we'll have them over here for a cookout afterwards." This gives you opportunity for your son to see that you care about him and his friends. It also gives you the opportunity to be an observer of what kind of friends your son has and what kind of "stuff" they talk about.

Questions/ Concerns:

1. Why don't we do more?
 - This usually comes from teens that don't come to what we do have.
 - The calendars around here are packed.
 - If I do lots of stuff, that's just more time away from home and remember, I'm trying to encourage you to do stuff with your children. They are worth your turning the TV off or ignoring the golf clubs for a weekend.
2. What will my kids invite their unsaved friends to?
 - Your home.
3. They won't develop socially.
 - They don't develop socially from "hanging out." Walk up to the average teen who "hangs out" a lot and try to carry on a conversation with him/her.
 - They will develop socially as they interact with people older and younger than themselves.
4. Everyone else is doing it.
 - What has formed our expectations? Why do we think what we think about youth groups? (Everyone else does it, we've never seen anything else, teens like it.)
 - Everyone else has miserably low expectations. I have high expectations.

- They are proficient when it comes to technology, sex, sports stats, and fashion. They have the capacity to follow hard after God.
5. They feel uncomfortable/they don't like it.
 - It is uncomfortable for someone who doesn't know Christ to talk about Him because they don't know Him.
 - It is uncomfortable for someone who isn't growing to be asked, "How have you taken a recent sermon and tried to apply it to your life?"
 - It is uncomfortable for someone who is focused on himself to come to a prayer meeting, or Mercy Ministry.
 - It is uncomfortable for someone who is "in the dark" to have light shined into their lives.
 - If you did this at your home they wouldn't like it, either.
 - Remember, I'm not primarily interested in whether they will LIKE it.
 6. You may have other question, concerns, or a challenge to this philosophy.
 - I want to be teachable and humble. I would invite you to come and talk to me. I would only ask that you would seek to be as Biblically intentional in your philosophy and methodology as I have tried to be in mine.
 - Also, if you are concerned about what the church (secondary) is doing, please come talk to me, but be aware that I'm going to ask you what you (the family, dad, "primary") are doing. Things like talking with them constantly about the things of the Lord. Looking for ways to develop them spiritually. Loving your spouse in front of them. Growing. Doing family activities together.
 - Parents, oh how much ought you to be continually devising for the good of your children! Often devise how to make them "wise children"; how to give them a desirable education, an education that may render them desirable; how to render them lovely and polite, and serviceable in their generation. Often devise how to enrich their minds with valuable knowledge; how to instill generous, gracious, and heavenly principles into their minds; how to restrain and rescue them from the paths of the destroyer, and fortify them against their peculiar temptations. There is a world of good that you have to do for them. You are without the natural feelings of humanity if you are not in a continual agony to do for them all the good that ever you can. It was no mistake of an ancient writer to say, "Nature teaches us to love our children as ourselves."⁴

Conclusion:

This is going to expose us. When our kids don't want to come to prayer meetings, mercy ministry, church, etc., we'll be tempted to say, "Jeremy isn't realistic. It isn't fun enough. He doesn't understand teens, etc." The reality might be, "My child doesn't have a heart for God"n a human level that responsibility falls to parents. It is easier to blame the church than to look at ourselves and say, "I haven't set the example of following hard after God. I haven't given my children a Christianity worth following, etc."

Please know that I am encouraged and optimistic. I Jn 4:4 "Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world." As we seek to connect our kids to Christ, God WILL grow them. They can be genuinely excited about God! This would not be a historically unusual thing, but it would be a cultural anomaly here. I believe God can and will do it. By God's grace we can see God grow our young adults into mature, God-focused, parent-loving, Christ-centered disciples!

⁴ ["A Father's Resolutions"](#) By Cotton Mather