

TOPICAL UPDATE Outreach and YOUTH Ministry



If current patterns aren't turning the tide, repeating them isn't going to change the situation.

Some of the most critical 'gospel gaps' in the NZ Church as a whole are in the youth ministry arena. This has relevance to key church leaders / denominational leaders /pastors' group convenors - not only youth leaders, because it is considerably relevant to the greater success of our God-given mission.

Consider these facts:

- About 85% of those who come to faith do so before age 20.
- Today, almost all of these from non-church families come to faith do so during their teenage years.
- Most of these come to faith between ages 11–14, noting research is suggesting worldview is now largely set by age 13. This makes intermediate-aged ministry highly significant.
- We estimate, youth ministry involvement is down to 25% of what it was 25 years ago in NZ.
- 30 years ago, there were 800 Christian school groups—now, only a fraction remain, with no national data, no networking yet, and little-to-no support.
- In the past, youth leaders in 12+ cities were united so much so that they would have 6 to 8 combined outreach events annually, with groups like Youth for Christ being prominent. Many towns replicated the pattern. Nothing on that scale exists today. It's probably that locations have 1 or no united outreach youth events in an average year.



The question is therefore, what new thinking might be needed?

GAP 1: Intermediate Aged Ministry

Barna Research (https://youtu.be/kaF5_wjtN_E?si=FQRvuwjUVjzQ_ZkT) says worldview is basically consolidated by age 13 these days. It's unimaginably young. The point is maybe primarily that, if worldview ideas related to God and faith aren't seeded' by this point, it is rare that a person embraces faith later. This highlights the importance not only of children's and Intermediate-aged youth ministry -but also of content within these groups that gives REASON for considering the worldview we hold to be true.

Regarding children's ministry - there are still some great opportunities. Many nonchurch parents are still fine with their children attending church holiday programmes - while a level of wisdom is needed in the way Christian messages and values are conveyed. However, in general, outreach to children is more difficult now than in the past. Intermediate aged youth ministries are needed.

Regarding influences - various online articles quickly reflect that parents spend about 7 minutes per day on average talking with their children, while media can be influencing them for 4 to 6 hours—or more. Without intentional discipleship from both parents and the church through everyday conversations, storytelling, and structured group discussions—the foundations needed for a sustained worldview / faith might not be built.

An important insight: Young people have deep questions! This remains true even when they're not asking them out loud. They're quietly wrestling with big issues—God, existence, morality, science, purpose, suffering, and hope. They need honest, thoughtful conversations with people they trust.

The power of simple, open conversations with 11 and 12-year-olds is often underestimated.

The importance of intermediate aged youth groups is underestimated - and the substance of them needs to go wider than the repeating of Bible stories with simple moralistic or devotional messages and games. Why believe this faith to be true?

Programme Options

SUNDAY DISCUSSION TIMES: These can be helpful during the sermon, especially if the sermon content or delivery isn't suited to younger teens. From around age 13, most can follow a sermon, though delivery style is a factor.

WEEKDAY PROGRAMMES: Midweek gatherings offer strong benefits. In our church, for example, we run a one-hour Friday programme at 5pm—mostly fun, with a short topic and discussion. It focuses on connection/relationships, outreach, and building momentum. There are then Sunday discussion times during the sermon that lean more toward deeper topical engagement.

INTEGRATED SUNDAY SCHOOL APPROACH: Some churches keep youth involved in Sunday School, giving them leadership roles in the wider programme -while finding other ways to create space for age-specific discussion or activities.



GAP 2: The Integration of junior youth (Tweens) to youth group

Bridging the Transition to Youth Group

The transition from Sunday School to youth group is believed to be the second-largest point of attrition from the Christian faith, with around one-third walking away because they don't see the point, or don't connect.

A healthy youth group is essential, but so too is a thoughtful integration strategy from early November onward annually:



1. **The youth leader visits the Sunday School** or intermediate group to introduce themselves and invite students to visit youth group. They make the group sound exciting. This is about mental preparation.
2. **Students nearing the end of intermediate school attend** a special youth group programme (or two) in late November and December, tailored to welcome them and share the vision for what's ahead.
3. **One or two current youth (ages 14-15) share their story** about the impact youth group has had on them. This feeds positive expectation.
4. **For larger youth groups, new youth could meet in their future small groups** so the new youth knows who their own small group leader will be the following year.
5. **Parents receive clear information** about the youth group to gain their support and involvement. Most youth will only be there if their parents value it - and drive them.
6. **The new year starts with a fun social event**, building connection amongst the new youth and excitement about the upcoming programming. Diligence is given to helping all feel welcome and new relationships becoming established. They need friends!

This transition is mostly about a social and relational connection—even while with a spiritual vision also. The goal is that these 12 or 13-year-old can't wait to join!

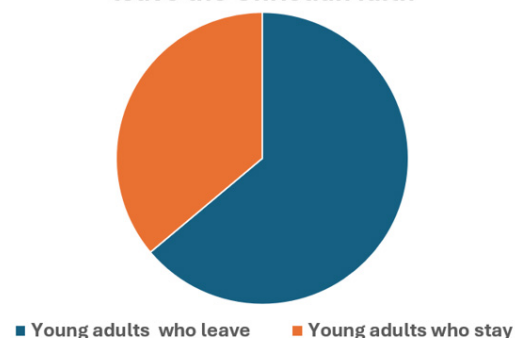
GAP 3: Young Adults Ministry (The Destiny of every youth leader)

An estimated two-thirds of youth leave the Christian faith during the young adult years (ages 18–22). The Fallout documentary by Creation.com highlights this trend clearly.

The Core Issue: No Clear Reasons for Belief

The main reason for this attrition is that many young people were never given compelling reasons to believe the faith is true. Multiple studies have evidenced this.

Estimated young adults (18-22) who leave the Christian faith



I once came across a study listing six reasons why young adults left church within which none directly mentioned a lack of reasons belief. On closer inspection, every reason tied back to questions about what we believe and why. For example, some perceived a moral prejudice in the faith around sexuality issues - which is actually a question about where moral values come from.

The Solution to Young Adult Attrition is in Youth Ministry

If we want to prevent this 'fallout', we will need to consistently equip young people early on not only with what we believe - but with why we believe it. The data has consistently said that this is a foundation for lasting faith - while many churches and youth ministries continue to give very little diligence to this preferring (a) to only teach what we believe -expecting blind faith, while (b) desiring that they experience the touch of the Spirit. These two things are needed - but so is a clear 'education' on why we believe the faith to be true - because our faith is a counter-narrative to what they hear through public media and education every day.

Here are two further reflections on Young Adults ministry.

The Need for a Young Adults Group

AN ATTRACTION FACTOR IS NECESSARY: Cultural shifts mean young people now take longer to reach independence—emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Where 13-year-olds once took on responsibilities like getting a job, today many 25-year-olds still live at home and rely on their parents. This delay affects both emotional and faith development - which affects how we approach young adult ministry. Many young adults are not mature enough to sustain their own faiths without help akin to what youth ministries have provided. While what appeals to an 18-year-old is very different to a 12-year-old, the point is that an attraction factor is still needed. This is maybe different to even just 20 years ago. Young adults ministry might benefit from a re-think.

- (See "The What and How of Youth and Young Adults Ministry" by Dave Mann for more. Noting chapter 10, 'Young Adults Ministry - The New Paradigm') - You can find his resource at the bottom of this document, listed under the 'Resources' section.

INVOLVEMENT KEEPS THEM CONNECTED: Young adults are more likely to stay when they are involved—like in worship, sound, welcoming, youth leadership, and more. Responsibility builds purpose and fosters social connection around shared tasks.

DISCIPLESHIP IS CRUCIAL: Every young adult needs a space to discuss faith openly. Intentional conversations ('discipleship') in small group settings can help them process complex issues they face in today's culture. Older ones who are willing to give relationship to them can facilitate - bringing care and wisdom.

How to find a Young Adults Leader?

If a youth leader stayed in the role a few years, they are the ideal person, as they already have relationship, and invested interest. In this sense, "Young adults ministry is the destiny of every youth leader."

Alternatively, a slightly older individual or young married couple can work well. They bring life experience and will shape group culture in a way that might not happen if they are not there. Concurrently, with the vision clarified, most of the actual programme planning and even discussion / Bible study leading can be delegated amongst the young adults. They will more strongly 'own' what they research and say themselves.

GAP 4: Pastors and Elders who take responsibility for ensuring both the youth ministry and its outreach are healthy

This point is significantly underestimated - and possibly not talked about enough amongst our various church leadership structures.

The average youth leader stays in the role for just 18–24 months. Most begin with little experience—limited crowd management, very few discussion skills, cannot explain what the gospel is succinctly, and no experience running school groups—all while juggling study or a first job. Can we really expect them to build a healthy culture in our youth groups on their own?

This high turnover keeps the momentum of many youth ministries and their outreach at a considerably low ebb.

This is a cycle that repeats.

The solution? Pastors and elders must take ownership. The health of a youth ministry starts with the older churches leaders who intentionally equip, guide and support the new youth leaders, bringing vision and oversight - and who visit and support regularly.

For example: When a new youth leader starts, how are they inducted? What guidelines, training or direction comes from senior leadership

For example: How often does the pastor / and elder and spouse join with the youth ministry, getting to know the youth, being aware of the challenges - to be positioned to bring encouragement or help?

The lack of this is a key reason youth leaders don't last long.

RESOURCE: See a booklet from the prior group of NZ denominational youth leaders on this topic at sustainablepractices.org.nz

The lack of this is a key reason youth outreach is so weak - with most NZ youth NOT having opportunity to hear of or know Jesus during their youth years.



RESOURCE: Godtalk.nz addresses this - see below.

Godtalk.nz was created after surveying the gaps in Christian youth ministry and outreach. The resource is purposed to support youth outreach by (a) equipping new youth leaders, while (b) resourcing them to bring simple and sensible outreach equipping.

It is however, a tool intended for senior pastors or key church leaders to know about - to pass to each new youth leader. Because of the high turn-over of youth leaders, this is the only way that youth outreach can be made strong.

How to use it effectively:

- Ask the new youth leader to watch all 12 short 'leadership' videos (totalling just 60 minutes) - godtalk.nz/leadership
- Then, meet with them later (approx. 90 minutes) to
- Discuss what they learned and encourage application.
- Clarify with them that annual outreach equipping is an expectation you have of them in their role (because it is unlikely to happen if this is not your expectation)
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- Highlight the equipping videos + discussion guides in the resource, thereby leaving them fully resourced for this - godtalk.nz/equipping
- Encourage leadership development—inviting them to now gather a few potential leaders to meet monthly for training, using one or two videos as a discussion tool within this training each time.

It is the process that sustains the focus. It is unlikely to happen any other way.

AN IDEA: If both the pastor and youth leader subscribe to the monthly Godtalk updates AllTogether.co.nz/godtalk-signup/ - the pastor can delete this each month - only until they are again looking for a new youth leader. The email therefore serves as a reminder of the above.

[Support resources are at the bottom]

GAP 5: Youth Leader Unity - An Overlooked Key to Momentum

It is natural in a small nation that denominational support structures for youth ministries are generally under-resourced. Our geography is extensive in contrast to our population. The level of support possible is limited!

The uniting of youth leaders in a city or town is a strategy that can somewhat mitigate this resourcing and support limitation. We are suggesting that a higher priority on youth leader unity (within each city and town) is needed - and that this requires ongoing ADULT intervention / intentionality to happen.

When united...

- Youth leaders will last longer.
- They can share resources, making the work easier.
- They can encourage their youth to be united just as they are - but in their schools.
- They can agree that outreach equipping is essential and make sure it happens.
- They can unite to enable city-wide outreach events that their youth groups can combine in.



The result?

- Youth ministry gains visibility.
- More teens engage in spiritual conversations.
- Interest in youth groups grows.
- Momentum is helped to return to youth ministry and outreach!

AN IDEA: What if pastors and other key church leaders – as a habit – facilitated the unity of their ever-changing youth leaders – again and again – every time their leaders change...? This more senior involvement is needed because the unity of youth leaders naturally falls over whenever the key youth leader facilitating it moves on.

A SUSTAINABLE EXTENSION OF THIS IDEA: What if a mature Christian couple hosted a delicious cooked bacon and egg breakfast (with hash browns, mushrooms, coffee, juice...) at the start of every school term – to which a key youth leader invites the youth leaders of their city or town? The youth leaders manage their own meeting. The point is that mature Christian leaders in each community take responsibility to ensure this is happening - because it will not happen in a sustained way otherwise! Regarding the agenda of the united youth leaders in any location Their unity is vital to outreach because it affects...

- sustainability in ministry,
- intentionality in outreach equipping,
- the facilitation of school groups - in which their youth likewise unite
- and catalyses larger youth events that add momentum and strengthen the gospel focus.

[Support resources are at the bottom]

GAP 6: Christian Youth Unity in Schools

Just as the strength of youth groups and their outreach will be helped as youth leader unite – so also strength and witness of youth in their schools. In uniting to pray, God can lead them as to what to do. (Three steps.)

The implications need perceiving.

If this is done...

- Many will be stronger in their faith and witness – and compromise less
- More conversations with peers will result
- More profile for the faith and youth groups will result
- More consciousness of and interest in the faith will result
- More interest in visiting a youth group or combined youth event will result
- More readiness for messages shared at the youth group will result
- More perseverance in faith decisions new youth seem to make will result – because those events and decisions were just one point on a journey – not the only point on the journey.

Conversations that start at school often continue or are completed at a youth group. It's exactly like hard soil that is 'tilled', to be ready for seed.

For the inverse, if conversations are not started at school through the boldness of youth – every other aspect of youth outreach will be weaker as a result - with the list above noted.



GAP 7: United Youth Events

This is our seventh and final gap.

There is a saying; 'Programmes don't reach people. It takes people to reach people.' This saying is true. However, programmes are still useful! A larger youth programme can attract a crowd, drawing people to an environment and message they might not otherwise hear.

Where the conversations youth are equipped to engage might spark interest - spurred on by the boldness generated through the unity of youth in their schools - it remains that interesting events are likely to catalyse their first visit to a youth group. Once there, conversations started at school and elsewhere naturally continue.

- Larger united events add momentum to Christian youth ministry.
- They give it profile.
- They can change the perception of Christian youth ministry from being 'a few small groups of youth in some churches,' to 'an amazing crowd of young people having fun that I want to be a part of!'



If we consider the Christian youth scene 25 and 30 years ago, Youth For Christ ran 6 to 8 city-level youth events annually in most NZ cities annually. They were 'cool' - with bands and creative arts and the gospel communicated. Youth wanted to be there!

For a great many young people, those events were a first step toward involvement with a local youth group and church. Today, this strategic 'bridge' is missing in most NZ cities and towns. Only the uniting of youth leaders in each location will change that.

It's another missing key to momentum and outreach ..while for its first step - the youth leaders must unite!

SUMMARY:

This isn't just for youth leaders—it's a vital focus for pastors, denominational leaders, and those who lead pastors' groups.

- We are reminded that 85% of those who come to faith do so before the age of 20 -the majority from non-church families doing so in their teen years, and most-specifically in the 11 - 14 year old age bracket.
- We are reminded that the average youth leader is only remaining in their role for approx 18 months to 2 years currently.

...And while some might say \$8 out of every \$10 spent on outreach could go to youth ministry - this isn't about money, its' about the CULTURE that sits within and amongst us as churches.

Can we SEE the gaps?

Do we have a CLARITY OF VISION regarding how they might now be plugged?

The issue isn't funding or staffing, because more staff within the current paradigm won't fix the problem. Different thinking is needed - and we suggest the above points and resources (above and below) represent just that!

- With the 7 gaps noted - what could you now note and apply in your church and/or youth group and city?
 - What could you copy and paste to someone else in an email - for their consideration?
 - What resources below might help?
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SUPPORT RESOURCES

SUPPORTING MINISTRIES: - alphabetically listed

www.alpha.org.nz/youth – an 8-week course

www.catalystmovement.com - encourage school groups plus outreach events & equipping

www.christiancamping.org.nz - multiple youth camps run at multiple locations.

forthiscity.co.nz - youth rallies, leader support and outreach equipping

godtalk.nz – outreach equipping resource for leaders and youth, plus school groups.

sunz.org.nz – Youth leader equipping and support, outreach equipping, safety and health and more.

www.unashamed.nz - outreach events & equipping

www.wol.org.nz - Outreach support to youth leaders, equipping and events. Also safety and much more
...or contact your own denominational youth ministry support person.

SUPPORT RESOURCES FROM OURSELVES:

- **For outreach equipping** - godtalk.nz/equipping
- **For youth outreach leadership training** - Note: This is for key church leaders to note as a tool for each new youth leader godtalk.nz/leadership
- **For youth leader unity** - godtalk.nz/unity – there is a 'how-to guide' available as a PDF
- **For school groups** - godtalk.nz/ideas/ - We note catalystmovement.com have a new 'how-to guide' as a PDF – likely soon available via their website, to which the above URL will provide a link.

A book by Dave Mann: "The What and How of Youth and Young Adults Ministry"

Link to full book: AllTogether.co.nz/the-what-and-how-of-youth-ministry/

- **Note Chapter 3** - Integrating 12 year olds
- **Note Chapter 10** - Young Adults Ministry
- **Note Chapter 11** - Young Adult Curriculum