The Networks of God:
Evangelizing Peer Clusters Learning from Saint Patrick and Donald McGavran

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Mid-adolescents now socialize in peer clusters. These gender specific groups of 4-10 gather around a shared value or set of values and a shared narrative. The cluster once formed becomes the formative influence for most teenagers. How does the church reach peer clusters with the good news of Jesus Christ when our dominant models of evangelism focus on the individual? This paper examines two previous models of evangelizing people groups as formulated by Donald McGavran of the Twentieth century and Saint Patrick of the Fifth century to see what can be learned to reach the peer clusters of today. Possibilities grounded in social networking theory arise.

This paper focuses on rediscovering some methods of evangelism that may prove helpful for today's youth culture. When referring to evangelism the paper will follow Walter Brueggemann's model in his book, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe*.[1] Brueggemann talks about evangelism in three scenes: theological conflict, announcement of victory, and lived appropriation. The theological conflict is one of which humanity is not a part, but is a bystander. This is the conflict represented in Scripture in many forms including: "good versus evil; life versus death; Yahweh versus Pharaoh; and Jesus versus Satan, sin, and death."[2] In each of these the victory is won and it is good news, which brings us to the second scene. The announcement of victory is where, "the news is *mediated* by the messenger… it is relayed."[3] The messenger's role is to proclaim the victory and show how the victory there matters here. The final scene, the lived appropriation, "is the reception of and response to the news."[4] It is by nature open ended because it cannot be programmed or predicted how giving our lives over to the new victor will look. For the purpose of this paper, evangelism will be referring to the role of Christians in the narrative: proclamation and lived appropriation.

<p align="center">Peer Cluster Theory</p>

For many involved in youth ministry the term, "peer cluster," was first heard in Chap Clark's 2004 book, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenager.*[5] In this book, Clark shares his findings from this ethnographic work spending an entire year at a public high school in California. He articulates a new way that mid-adolescents are socializing and finding meaning: peer clusters.

Peer cluster theory was developed by Eugene R. Oetting and Fred Beauvais in their research on adolescent drug and alcohol abuse. First published in an article in 1986, Oetting and Beauvais used a combination of psychosocial and life-style theoretical approaches to develop this new theory about socialization among adolescents. "The potency of peer influence is not new; peer influence, however, is a broad and general term. Peer cluster theory differs - its proponents contend that small, identifiable peer clusters determine where, when, and how drugs are used and that these clusters specifically help shape attitudes and beliefs about drugs."[6] They go on to differentiate between a "life-style" which is a broad pattern for living

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[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

[2] Ibid., 19.

[3] Ibid., 26.

[4] Ibid., 30.

[5] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0 : Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Baker Academic, 2011), 59–73.

[6] E.R. Oetting and Beauvias, Fred, "Peer Cluster Theory: Drugs and the Adolescent.," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 65 (September 1986): 20.

such as a drug life-style, a "peer group" which is a formal or informal group that the youth is associated with, such as a football team, and "peer clusters" which are tight cohesive groups which clearly defined attitudes and shared behaviors.[7] In this first articulation they recognize that peer clusters are much like family in their formative relationships and they note the group thinking regarding behaviors and attitudes. A year later, they further clarify

> . . . every member of a peer cluster is seen as an active, participating agent in shaping the norms and behaviors of that cluster, in deciding whether, when, and how to use drugs. From the outside it may look like peer pressure is leading to conformity, particularly if a parent or counselor wants to believe in the innocence of a particular child.... [but] every youth in a peer cluster is constantly and actively involved in deciding what is "right." There is no pressure applied by others on one particular child.[8]

Peer clusters reflect more than just a group of individuals. The cluster values, thinks, and behaves together. The peer cluster is the formative and mediating influence on most mid-adolescents' lives.

So powerful and important is the bond in this group Oetting and Beauvais point out that treating youth involved in peer clusters might best be accomplished by treating the whole peer cluster. "The dominance of the peer cluster in determining adolescent drug use means that, unless this influence can be changed, there is little hope of changing drug involvement…the counselor may need either to see that links with all of the old peer clusters are broken or to change the entire peer cluster using methods analogous to family or systems therapy."[9] This reveals the power of the peer cluster in the lives of teenagers and the emergence of a group thinking that is different than just the sum of individuals.

Most of the research done on peer clusters has been in the context of deviant behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse and bullying. However, the research also indicates that peer clusters are capable of positive impact regarding attitudes and behaviors. Martin Dinges and Oetting note, "From this dialogue emerges the guiding ideology of the peer cluster, which includes conduct norms and expectations based on what the group feels is right or wrong. If a peer cluster sees drug use as acceptable or desirable, then drug use is probable. Should the peer cluster discourage drug use and provide negative sanctions, abstinence is likely."[10] Therefore, peer clusters possess the potential to be a positive influence on the lives of the individuals in the cluster.

How does the church reach peer clusters with the good news of Jesus Christ when our

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[7] Ibid., 19.

[8] E.R. Oetting and Beauvias, Fred, "Peer Cluster Theory, Socialization Characteristics and Adolescent Drug Use: A Pasth Analysis," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 34, no. 2 (1987): 206.

[9] Oetting and Beauvias, Fred, "Peer Cluster Theory: Drugs and the Adolescent.," 21.

[10] Ibid.

dominant models of evangelism focus on the individual? If peer clusters are the way that mid-adolescents are determining values and behaviors, how does a church ministry with youth share good news to them and with them? Could it be that our more popular methods of one-on-one evangelism are actually creating more obstacles to the gospel when the field is ready for harvest?

Looking Back

Donald McGavran and Saint Patrick both encountered people groups who thought corporately rather than individually. McGavran and Patrick both changed the ways they approached evangelism and disciple making so that they could reach these different people groups as groups, not by pulling one away at a time. The results of their work helped change the church. What can we learn from these two church leaders from very different times that can help us today?

Individualism

While not every church or youth ministry is the same, most youth ministry books and trainings on evangelism focus on *the individual*. This was an important and necessary development for the church in the modern era, but in this different age, perhaps those models are less helpful. In an era where peer clusters are the norm, where mid-adolescents think as a cluster, those methods focused on the individual are creating more obstacles to coming to faith in Christ.

The move to radical individualism started in the period of the Renaissance.[11] During this time the world began to value individual reasoning over anything else. This means that the authority that the dominant group held in a culture was no longer seen as an exclusive authority. Each person's ability to reason would become the primary authority in life. Renee Descartes famous phrase, "I think therefore I am" is a good theme for this era. Identity and purpose and future come from thinking things out. The modern experiment is about the individual's ability to reason out the truth through breaking things down into their smallest units, analyzing and understanding each piece, and then manipulating them so that humanity could create a perfect world. Radical individualism called for some changes in the church and the way it shared good news with people.

No longer could the church leaders just stand up as the authority of the group and declare that something was true or that something could happen. Each person in modernity wanted to test it for themselves. If reason ruled the day, then everyone who had the same information should be able to come to the same conclusion. The church adapted its methods of evangelism to reach this cultural reality. The church developed "spiritual laws" to go along with "scientific laws." The focus for evangelism was on giving each individual the correct information about God, sin, Jesus, and consequences. In this era, this method of giving each individual the correct information so that they could reason out that Jesus is the Christ was very successful. Apologetics exploded as people were trying to systematically reason out why

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[11] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 57–82.

Christianity was a valid and true religion.

These adaptations in the way the gospel was presented were needed and were valuable for that time. But in today's culture of peer clusters, one has to wonder if those individualistic methods are perhaps losing their cultural relevance and that different methods are needed. Critiques of this individualistic methodology are arising in places where people do not think, value, or behave as individuals.

Where there is a group mind that makes group decisions, this method of sharing with just the individual and asking just the individual to make a decision apart from her cluster regarding their relationship with Christ is problematic. For one it is asking the individual to think and decide in ways that he is not used to. Peer clusters are where a lot of these decisions, especially about values, are worked out. In the modern individualistic method, the young person the church is evangelizing is asked to step away from that youth cluster and make this decision completely on her own.

Second, if an individual does make a choice for Christ on his own, the next step is usually to leave that cluster behind because her values are now different. This can be compared to asking a young person to leave his family and take up a new one. While this is possible, it is at the least very difficult and at its worst a stunting of identity formation.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, ignoring the power of the peer cluster makes permanent change less likely and misses an opportunity to reach a group of people with the good news of Christ. Why not try to reach out to the whole peer cluster? Why not try to help several people come into a relationship with Christ instead of one at a time? Scripture, theology, and church history have a few things to teach us about how we might alter our current evangelism methods to be more effective in reaching peer clusters.

Scripture and People Groups

Scripture shows that people *groups* can be reached. Reading the New Testament reveals that this a much more common way for people to become followers of Jesus than individual conversions. In our modern world, we perhaps focused more on the stories of individual conversations and conversions, such as Nicodemus, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the criminal on the cross next to Jesus, because of our modern lenses of individualism and reason. But Scripture also tells us of whole families, clans, and groups of people coming to Christ.

In Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit moves at Pentecost the church baptizes three thousand new believers. Think of the audacity of this movement! No four week discipleship class was required before baptism. Also realize that without this large number of Jews coming to Christ so quickly then there would not have been critical mass, good leadership, and kindred spirits to encourage each other. There is an emphasis on many people becoming Christian in the early church (Acts 5:14; Acts 6:7). This is a movement within families and people groups coming to Christ. With three thousand Jews (and then two thousand more) coming to faith in Christ, there would have been many Jewish people who had at least a relative who had encountered this early Christian movement. This undoubtedly helped the spread of the gospel.

The spread of Christianity goes beyond the Jewish ethnic group fairly early. In Acts 8, when Philip proclaims Christ, "… crowds… all paid close attention to what he said… they were

baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:5,6,12 NIV)." Again, note the emphasis on the people groups. Acts 10 begins with the story of Cornelius and his family being filled with the Spirit and baptized as a group. Chapter 11 includes the story of persecution spreading out Christians and the gospel being shared in Antioch among Greeks where a "great number of people" turn to Jesus.

As the church grows Paul becomes more intentional about reaching out to people groups by first visiting synagogues in the cities he visited. At these synagogues Paul would find people who were either already Christians, who had heard of Christ and the Christian movement, and Gentiles on "the bridge," interested in faith and God in some ways. Paul wisely worked among these groups of people to spread the gospel. Again we see *groups* of people coming to Christ.

A few distinctions here might be helpful. First, it is important to realize that when talking of reaching people groups the idea is NOT that people are just blindly following others in their group. In these cultures people think of themselves as part of the group, not first as individuals. It would be almost impossible for people in these groups to separate themselves from the group in terms of identity. Therefore, the movement is not without first information and in many cases, experiences of Christ. Each person in the group hears and sees the gospel presented and therefore is part of the decision process.

Second, it should also be noted that God can and does work in individuals as well. There are many obstacles for these individuals to remain Christian because of culture and identity, but it can and does happen. But the church must be willing to see that more often than not, it is people in groups who come to Christ.

God as missionary God

Theologically, it would appear evident that God, as missionary God, would be interested in reaching people groups. Humanity is created out of community (Genesis 1:26), the Triune God living in perfect community, for community. That is to say that humans are wired to live in community with others and with God. These two foci of community are not exclusive of each other. In fact, they are dependent on one another. It is at least very difficult, if not impossible, to live in community with God if there is not community with others. Jesus talks often of the expression of love coming in relationships with others.

The *missio Dei*, mission of God, is "the purpose of God to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Christ Jesus in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are brought into communion with God."[12] If the church is sent into the world to join God in *his* mission, then peer clusters would be a part of that mission.

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[12] Charles Edward van Engen et al., *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

Donald McGavran and People Movements

In 1955, Donald McGavran wrote *The Bridges of God* in which he discusses the importance and value of reaching groups of people with the gospel. Simply put, "This book asks how clans, tribes, castes, in short how *Peoples* become Christian"[13] (emphasis original). He explores the process in certain cultures where whole people groups can become Christian. McGavran challenges his contemporary models of evangelism that were only individualistic and offers another way forward. Churches find it more possible to reach pre-Christian people without requiring them to cross linguistic, cultural, ethnic, or class barriers to become new disciples.

McGavran discusses that in his time, despite so many resources, trained professionals, and so many open doors, the mission of the church was not really making a huge difference.[14] Similar to the ways that many today believe that youth ministry, despite its many resources, trained professionals, and open doors is not really making a huge difference. Therefore, he wondered if perhaps our methods were not right for reaching people groups and that perhaps we could learn from places that are exploring evangelism differently.

He noted that in the West there is a radical individualism and that the evangelistic models for reaching that individualism are important. He explains the movement this way, "As larger family groupings were broken up through migration, the movement of rural folk to the cities, and repeated shifts of homes, people came to act for themselves without consulting their neighbours or families. A habit of independent decision was established. In the Christian churches this habit was further strengthened by the practice of revival meetings appealing for individual decisions to the accompaniment of great emotion."[15] He noted that the separate, individual decisions, apart from family influence were seen in the church as the only valid way of becoming Christian. He goes on to content that removing people from their influencing groups (family, clan, tribe, cluster) is often how Christianity is defeated in new Christians. "Thus a Christward movement within a people can either be defeated by extracting the new Christians from their society (I.e. by allowing them to be squeezed out by their non-Christian relatives) or by the non-Christians so dominating the Christians that their new life in Christ is not apparent."[16] Certain cultures in particular struggle with this only individualistic approach.

McGavran recognizes that there exists within certain people groups a "group mind," where the "individual does not think of himself as a self-sufficient unit, but as a part of the group."[17] In these groups the group decision is not the sum of separate individual decisions, but rather the decision of the group as a whole.

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[13] Donal Anderson McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 1.

[14] Ibid., 4–6.

[15] Ibid., 9.

[16] Ibid., 11.

[17] Ibid.

For groups that change religion it is a people group change. The healthy and constructive changes come when the members move together. "Peoples become Christian as a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than merely their sum. This may be called a chain reaction. Each decisions sets off others and the sum total powerfully affects every individual."[18] Because the group is where the identity of each member lies, this kind of group decision is a powerful and lasting one.

McGavran knows that this kind of approach is challenging for many in the modern mindset. "For Western individualistic Christian thinkers the new unfamiliar factor in all this lies in the fact that there is a social factor which must be taken into account when peoples are being discipled. In leading peoples to become Christian the Church must aim to win individuals in their corporate life. The steady goal must be the Christianization of *the entire fabric which is the people,* or large enough parts of it that the social life of the individual is not destroyed."[19] He realizes that there is great danger in removing people from their group as an individual.

McGavran argues for a two-step process in making people movements Christian: discipling and perfecting. Using the Great Commission passage from Matthew 28 as a guide, he advocates for first the sharing of information about Christ which is followed by a commitment by the group to Christ. "Positively, a people is discipled when its individuals feel untied around Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, believe themselves to be member of His Church, and realize that 'our folk are Christians, our book is the Bible, and our house of worship is the Church.'"[20] For McGavran this stage largely involved the removal of other sinful gods from the lives of the group and putting Christ first.

The second stage has more to do with ethical decisions and changed behavior. McGavran called it, "Perfecting the People." "This is the brining about of an ethical change in the discipled group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for individuals making up each generation as they come to the age of decision."[21] This is where Christ as the center of life is worked out in everyday life.

In this two stage process, McGavran believes it is vitally important the early focus of discipleship be on helping people remove other gods and claim Christ as their King. The focus should NOT be on behavior change. The second stage of perfecting is where the process shifts to living out the new faith in the way of Jesus.

In Donald McGavran's method the church is challenged to adjust its views on evangelism for different cultures, moving beyond the individualistic method grounded in Western, modern culture and to see a potentially larger mission field in the people groups and their evangelization. This provides a different lens for youth ministry today to view evangelizing youth peer clusters. Saint Patrick, also dealt with a culture that found identity in

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[18] Ibid., 12.

[19] Ibid., 16.

[20] Ibid., 14.

[21] Ibid., 15.

groups more than individuals and he too adapted his methods.

<center>Saint Patrick's Teams</center>

In the fifth century a young man named Patrick was kidnapped from his home in Britain and sold into slavery in Ireland. Patrick was a slave for six years during which time he was put to work herding cattle. During this incredibly lonely time three significant things happened to Patrick. First, Patrick fell in love with God. As a young man raised in the church he had little use for the prayers he had been taught, but in slavery, with few other people to talk with Patrick began praying to God. He finds God in his prayers and the beauty of the natural world around him. Second, Patrick learns the culture and language of the Celts. Third, and closely related, Patrick falls in love with the people and culture of his captors. Patrick eventually escapes from his slavery and returns home, but these three things remain in Patrick and he experiences a call from God back to the Celtic people.

Ireland was indeed a heathen and barbaric land.   Patrick himself refers to the unsaved people's as "heathen" and "barbaric" at times in his writings.   The Irish as a civilization had little to no concept of Christianity, even though there were a few Christians living in Northern Ireland at the time. While the Roman world was becoming increasingly driven by the urban centers of the time, Ireland, during Patrick's time, had no civitates, no population centers of any kind, but had only farms and scattered people.[22] Not only was the land of the Irish, untamed, so too it seems were the people. The Irish were peer driven, feeling driven and "right-brained", lacking the "refinement" or "class" of the reason centered, logical and practical Romans.[23]   This was a wild country in an unknown part of the world.   Maps of the day labeled this part of the world, "Here do be monsters".[24] It is little wonder that even those who were Christian were not seen on the same level as those from civilized societies.

Patrick, though educated and trained in the Roman church, knows that he must modify his approach in order to reach these tribal people. A reasoned, individualistic approach had not previously worked with the Celts and therefore, Patrick knew he had to adjust his approach as well.

Among the adjustments to mission, Patrick and his team embraced the communal over the individual, from the way they shared the gospel to the way they communicated and lived it. The Irish never did evangelism alone, instead choosing to do things in teams so as to better think, develop friendships and minister.[25] To this end the way of evangelization and discipleship can be summed up with the phrase: belong before believe.   Patrick would get people into the life of Christianity and so they would learn as they lived everyday life.

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[22] Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, 1995), 110.

[23] George G Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West-- Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 9.

[24] Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, 108.

[25] Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 47.

Patrick's teams of Christians would seek out other groups of Celtic peoples and invite them to share a way of life. Using the arts and spirituality within the Celtic culture, these Christian teams would engage in relationship and seek to tell and live a story where Christ was the center of their lives and other gods had no power. While the Christian teams were witnessing to a larger theological conflict, the ways they asked the Celts to respond to the gospel was not leave their groups or clans behind, but rather to engage Christ in those groups and clans. In this pluarlistic, communal culture, this approach was very successful.

In Patrick's approach to evangelism, the church also had to adjust its methods in order to move past an individualistic only method and towards a method that reached out as a group to other groups. The focus here was to adapt away from the typical Roman method because that was not the same culture as the Celts. The church today must adapt its methods of evangelism for a changing youth culture and its peer clusters.

Reaching Peer Clusters

Peer clusters are formative for mid-adolescents. Evangelistic attempts to remove youth from their cluster often are accompanied by more obstacles to accepting Christ and to a sustainable response to the gospel. Following the models of McGavran and Patrick could help the church reach whole peer clusters of young people.

The first and most important role the church plays in this process of reaching whole peer clusters is to invest in the peer clusters that are already a part of their youth ministry. Since peer clusters are the predominant ways that mid-adolescents connect and relate these groups are present in the church as well. Some (hopefully most or all) of these peer clusters involved in the church will be positive influences towards Christ. Through some intentional discipleship and leadership development, many of these peer clusters can adopt a missionary impulse. When a peer cluster realizes the missionary heart of God and realizes that they have permission and power to reach others, they become a powerful force in sharing the gospel. Much like Patrick practiced and taught ministry by groups, so too could these positive youth peer clusters minister together.

Social networking theory is helpful to understand this concept. Social networking works to connect one group of friends to other groups of friends. It does this by recognizing the more informal relationships that exist in a person's life and then introduces the more formal friends to these other fringe associations. Figure 1 below is helpful in picturing this. Youth A is in a peer cluster with youth B, C, D, and E. These are all strong connections and relationships. Youth B is also in a more informal relationship with Youth Z. Social networking would attempt to help all of persons A-E connect with person Z AND all of person Z's relationships starting with person Z's most formal and close relationships. If we apply this to peer clusters and our current youth culture, then we can see that peer clusters have the potential to influence both individuals and other peer clusters with the gospel.
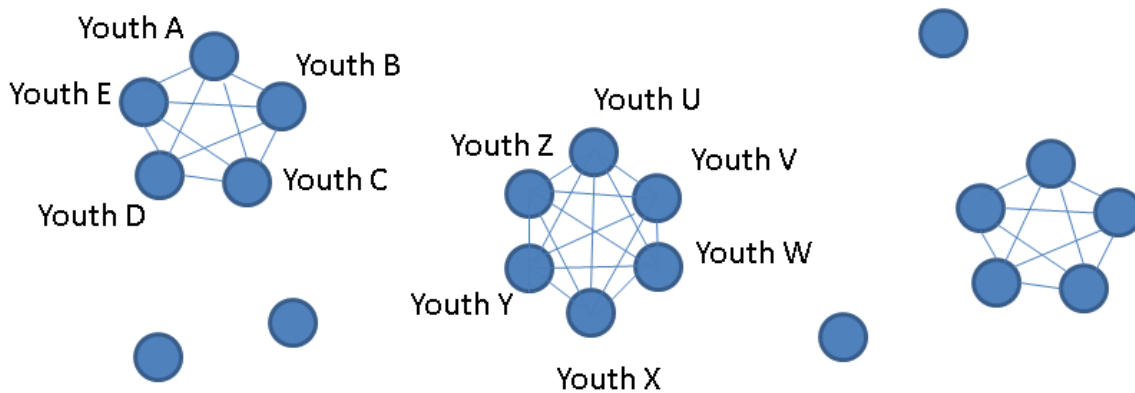
Figure 1

Chap Clark briefly mentions that there are some midadolescents who do not have a peer cluster. These are young people who might be considered a "cluster of one" (see figure 2).
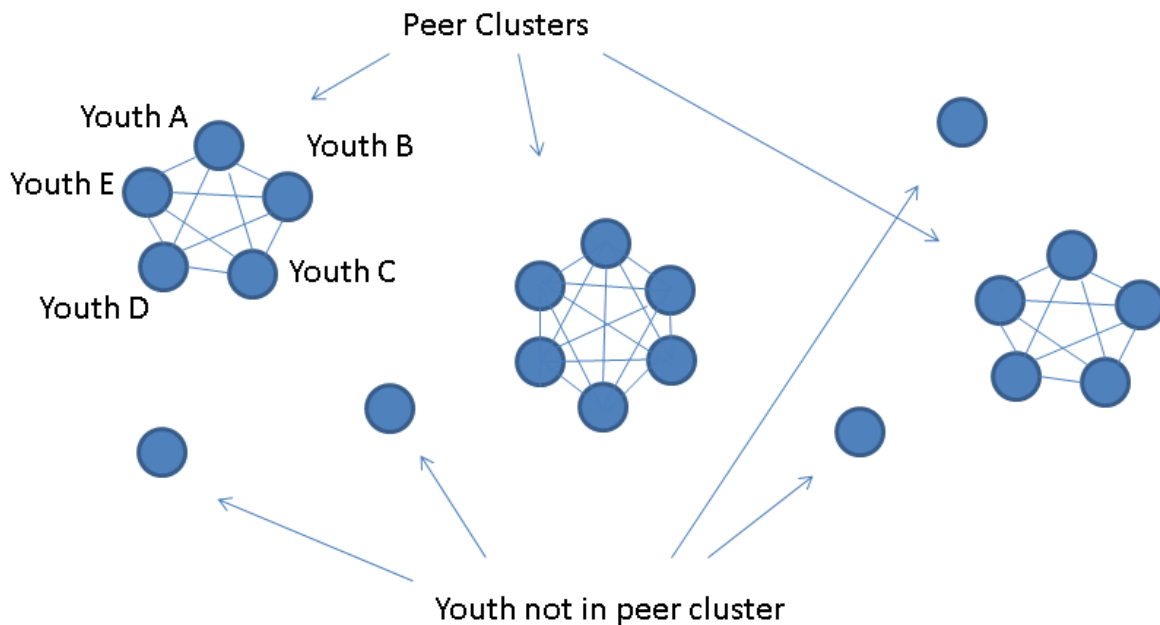

Figure 2

Oftentimes these youth are looking for a peer cluster to relate to and fit into. If the church trained some of its existing peer clusters to be on the constant "look out" for these kinds of young people, then there could be many opportunities for these positive peer clusters to help these individuals belong before they believe (see Figure 2). By bringing some of these new individuals into the cluster they could expose that young person to the lifestyle of following Christ, well before that individual may fully accept faith in Christ. In the power of loving

relationship the peer cluster would help that young person know about Christ, adopt the practices of Christ followers, and value Christ above other things in their life. This connects with McGavran's model of first discipling others and then perfecting. In Brueggemann's definition of the lived drama of evangelism, the group would both proclaim victory and begin introducing and modeling appropriate response.
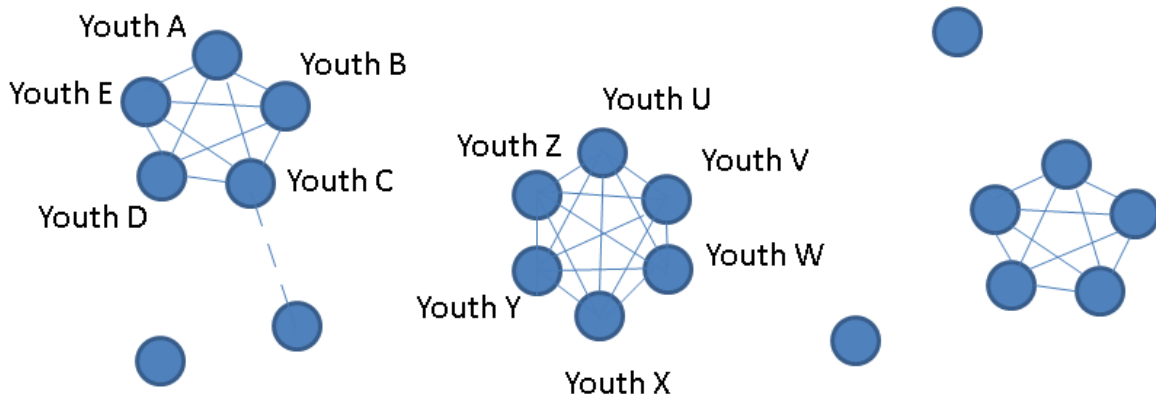

Figure 3

The other way that positive peer clusters could be powerful in evangelism is in reaching whole other peer clusters. Utilizing the current social networking reality of young people, these positive peer clusters could seek out other peer clusters that they are already informally related to with the intent of modeling Christian love and behavior while seeking to proclaim to that group the love of Christ. McGavran's model of discipling recognizes that while the group will make this important decision of changing beliefs and values together, it often takes each member having received much instruction in the Christian faith. With some intentionality a positive peer cluster could reach whole other clusters of mid-adolescents rather than individuals (see Figure 3). This follows the pattern of Patrick in ministry in groups for modeling appropriate Christian response to the proclamation of good news.
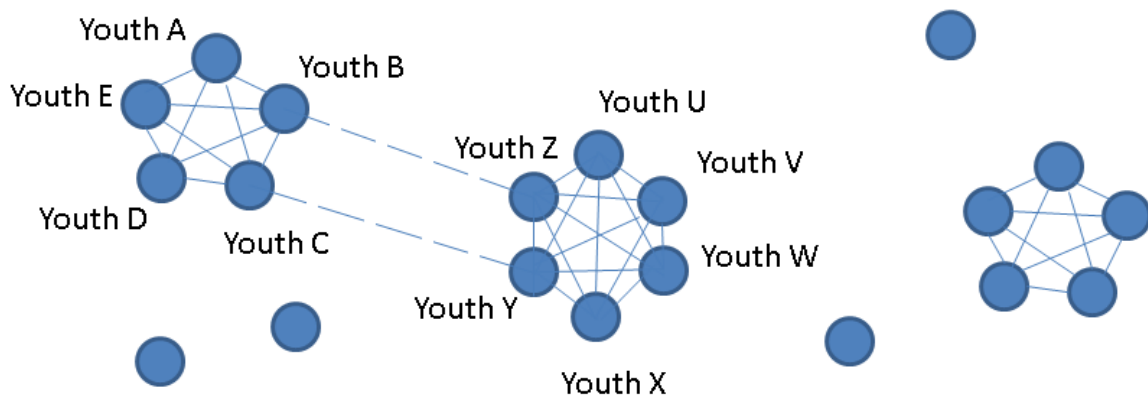

Figure 4

By adopting a people group method of evangelism like Patrick and McGavran for peer clusters, churches could work through the current sociological relational patterns of youth, remove significant obstacles for youth in accepting Christ and appropriating their faith, and see significant increase in youth coming to Christ. This also offers the church an opportunity to train groups of young people who see themselves a missionary. They together see part of their role to reach out in their schools, workplaces, team, clubs and communities to other clusters of youth. They understand the missionary impulse of a missionary God in their midst and are willing to embrace an outward focus for those youth who are without a close community cluster. They are also focused on reaching other peer clusters by inviting groups of people to join the larger community of faith. By doing this the church recognizes youth as valuable missionaries and encourages them to operate at the micro level of culture. The church also acknowledges the gifts, dreams and calling that God has given to youth.

In the current adolescent world of peer clusters, the churches individualistic models of evangelism are not working well. If the church is willing to adopt the people group evangelism methods of Patrick and McGavran, then there can be some significant changes and growth in the effectiveness of the church witnessing to God's activity in the world. The people group model would acknowledge the power and influence of peer clusters and utilize that to spread the gospel of Christ.

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