

**Youth Ministry on the Margins:
Contrasting Four Approaches to Disability and Trauma Informed Ministry**
AYME October 2024

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Abstract:

Potentially, the largest unreached people group in the world are those with disabilities. At-risk, adolescents with trauma, disabled teens, and those in foster care are at the margins of society, the church and youth ministry. What models are present for youth ministry students and pastors to equip them to work with disability, trauma and children in foster care? This paper will outline the need, and then discuss the main barriers to inclusion: mainstreaming, immunity to change, individualism, and scarcity. The paper will conclude with four main philosophical approaches to disability ministry with youth: Approach “zero,” integration, separate space, and hybrid/outreach. It is important to connect each approach to its theological and philosophical suppositions as well as practical considerations regarding the context.

"We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty."

G. K. Chesterton

This paper will engage barriers for ministry and practical models of ministry for youth with disabilities, those with trauma and those experiencing both trauma and disability. While youth ministry, at times, has led the charge to reach those on the margins, there is much room to grow. The two largest unreached people groups in the US are those with disabilities and in foster care. Twenty percent of the U.S. population has a diagnosable disability. Many more have serious mental health issues, estimated at another 20%. Significant overlap between the groups compounds the concerns. The vast majority of people with disabilities do not attend church. The vast majority of the more than ten million families who contain a member with one or more disabilities do not attend church. These loved ones and their families, even when counting overlap between disability and mental health, constitute a significant minority of the US population.

In addition to disability, those affected by trauma are another massive population. Trauma can negatively affect physical growth, child development, relationships, reasoning and moral decision-making. Trauma tends to spread and manifest in a variety of unpredictable and often unrelated ways. Trauma can cause chronic and recurring physical issues, even incapacitating a child or adult. Trauma often leads to behaviors and risk taking that lead to other mental, physical, relational or legal problems. There is no way to count the number of children and youth experiencing trauma but the effects can be overwhelming. Over 425,000 children in the U.S. are in foster care in any given

year. A 13-year-old boy in foster care has a one percent chance of adoption and a 50% chance of being involved in the juvenile justice system by the age of 17 (Juvenile). There is also significant trauma due to abuse or abandonment for most every child entering the foster system. Trauma, mental health and disability each affect millions and tens of millions when considering immediate family. Trauma, mental health and disability is the new margin, the church's next mission field.

The Mission of God and the Margin

Pursuit, hound of heaven, searching. God is a seeking God, one who watches and runs to the wayward son. God describes his own character toward the margin in Ezekiel 34:16: "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick...." He came to seek and save. God's vision of the church rightly instills bringing, binding and strengthening imagery in our vision. The church is to be like God, the vehicle of God's mission to the world. *Missio Dei* is the name of God's mission to the world. Missiologist Van Sanders writes that, "When kept in the context of the Scriptures, *missio Dei* correctly emphasizes that God is the initiator of His mission to redeem through the Church a special people for Himself from all of the peoples (*τὰ ἔθνη*) of the world. He sent His Son for this purpose and He sends the Church into the world with the message of the gospel for the same purpose" (24). It is striking that God is looking for a special people from all people. Yet there is an unfortunate irony. Those who have special needs, such as experiencing a physical or mental exceptionality, foster care, or trauma, are not present in the church.

Is it possible for Christians to perceive foster care and disability as important as the 10-40 window? While most unreached people groups live within a rectangle of 10

latitude and 40 longitude, there is a population of tens of millions, including each youth minister's neighbors, who may never enter typical church buildings or programs. Those on the margin are often excluded systemically, a deep sadness and shame of the church today. One of the most unreached groups in the world are living down the street and should be just as important as those in the 10-40 window. The church's integrity and obedience as disciples are at stake if we send missionaries and money to distant continents while thinking we can ignore uncomfortable margins at home. These people are also God's mission; he desires to draw them to himself through the church. God's desire for the margins is not a second mission, a special mission or simply a part of the primary mission. All people are at the core of God's work. There is no margin for him. God will not exclude any people group from being his people.

A Call to the Church

Historically, the church has been on the edge of supporting rights and advocating for justice and freedom. In this way, God's people are the primary agent of transforming the culture to see all people as valuable irrespective of money, race, or nation. All people are eligible to be part of society and God's kingdom. If nothing else, all people should follow Jesus, for he has transformed the concept of dignity, and welcomed all into the human family and the family of heaven. It is important to rightly credit the church with revolutionizing the world's view of women as more than property, being at the forefront in abolition, and taking a stand in civil rights. Consider Christian leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr, William Wilberforce, and Ida B. Wells. They are remembered for their bold application of Christian belief to confront social dysfunctions, for contesting for justice and their lives embracing marginalized groups.

Unfortunately, the church has been behind the culture in engaging specific at-risk populations today. The church needs new pioneers to transform itself, just as it has transformed itself in the past. The world still needs youth ministry, a youth ministry of the old kind, one that expands horizons to the margins.

The above observations are not new. Many have called the church to be robustly Christian to the least of these. There are amazing theological, philosophical and anthropological resources that highlight a strong Christian tradition and foundation in engaging disability, orphans and the sick. The church cares for those at the margins. The concern is evident from the Old Testament, the New Testament, through the early church, and to today. Youth ministry's pioneering spirit has the possibility to transform the church today by acting on the creative and evangelistic impulse at the core of the youth ministry movement. The following pages will equip and inform pastors, youth ministries and parents as they work with teens on the margins.

Powerless children need advocates that care, listen, advocate and fight for the resources and rights of children in their community, school and local congregation. Showing care could be as simple as adjusting the physical layout of a youth room to allow access for a physical disability. Listening could be creating a safe place to share their story. Advocating may be providing a presence in a court hearing as the spiritual caregiver to a teen facing a juvenile court. Fighting might mean helping a foster family find a CASA (court appointed special advocate), who can speak directly to a judge when a state social worker seems to be promoting an agenda that is counter to the best interest of the child. Understanding might mean training and familiarizing people to the need, so that cultures can change, and everyone can have *a place on the boat*.

Four Barriers: Mainstreaming, Individualism, Immunity and Scarcity

A perspective change is needed. Clearly, there are some barriers to ministry among those with disability or trauma. The last section of this paper will engage specific models and techniques/ First, a perceptive change is necessary if those models are to be fruitful. This section will address four specific problematic perspectives that must be adjusted prior to creating or launching programs. These assumptions can be addressed through biblical teaching and preaching that challenge the biases present in the local congregation. The following four barriers are great enemies of inclusion of those on the margin: mainstreaming, individualism, immunity to change and scarcity.

Barrier #1 Mainstreaming: Same Lake, Different Boat

It is common to hear the phrase, “everyone is in the same boat.” This phrase implies that all humans have a fundamental set of needs, a shared core to humanity. No matter the differences, we can and should identify with one another. The phrase “everyone is in the same boat” likely highlights the common traits of people, shared human experiences and the need for solidarity across differences. As mentioned earlier, Christianity has been the most significant force in the world elevating the value and place of all people. However, this amazing and necessary perspective that values every person may make it difficult to see the individual needs of each person.

“Why are all the beautiful people always up front leading in youth group?” Mike had a youth pastor friend who was asked this question by a teen in his youth group. Initially Mike’s friend was defensive. After reflection and likely a bit of work by the Holy Spirit, he was crushed. The popular, the lovely and the normal had become the norm for the face of the ministry. Mainstreaming is the first barrier of a margins perspective

change. Mainstreaming often creates an expectation of normal that does not allow for variance and variety. A program designed for care and safety might actually reinjure teens who are already excluded from virtually every aspect of society. It can be painfully clear to many teens that not everyone is in the same boat.

Stephanie Hubach describes a different metaphor for her two sons, one of whom has downs syndrome. Hubach suggests that the phrase “everyone is in the same boat” is inaccurate if used to state that everyone has the same experiences. She suggests that many people may be in the same lake, but are not all in the same boat.

Experiences and capabilities are very different. The human story is essentially the same but not experientially the same. “We share a common story but the details of our life experiences and our life circumstances may vary significantly” (Hubach 37).

Barrier #2 Individualism: Exclusion or Embrace

The current societal emphasis is now on individual experiences, the second great barrier of perspective change. Moral codes no longer define good or true. Not even power or money guide western most forcefully anymore. The idea that “I am the master of my own boat” is a core tenant. Something is considered “good” if it is “good for me,” if I benefit, or if I think it true. Those outside ourselves are at best useful for our own ends, at worst they hinder us in our pursuit of our ends. Friends give “likes” or “follows,” making friendship a commodity toward my own ends or enrichment. Consider what this view does to those who are inconvenient or marginalized. Rampant individualism does not just threaten those on the “outside” of the norm, but the entire social order. Society does not exist as an abstraction. Individuals, families and associations make up real relationships. When individuals act solely in favor of their own interests, their own boat,

they slip into a decadence that undermines all social relationships in favor of personal good. Yale professor Mirolav Volf states, “otherness, the simple fact of being different in some way, has come to be defined as in and of itself evil.” (1996). Most human atrocities begin by dehumanizing the other person, all in favor of personal benefit. The decadence is not benign. Volf states that, “it may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world—in the living rooms, in inner cities, or on the mountain ranges—testify indisputably to its importance” (1996). Hubach goes on to explain that we, in search of comfort and affinity, see ourselves in our own lake, protected and purposefully isolated. Instead of reaching out, the church acts as a protection against the outside world. People resist any difference that disrupts and challenges the mirage. Those who experience trauma, or have a mental health concern are not comfortable in the church because the church is not comfortable with them. Disability and trauma is a difficult challenge to complacency and identity, to one’s very sense of self. The church can seek exposure to the hard realities of those who think and act in ways that are often incomprehensible. Instead of exclusion, the call is to embrace one’s enemies. The call to love is difficult. How can we love an enemy if we cannot create space for the unlovely or the awkward? The call is to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Romans 15:7). A robust theology of hospitality in relation to those on the margins is needed in attempting to counter personal bias and culturally driven individualism. One way to look at margins is asking the question “Who gets to be in the boat?” The church is not isolated islands or independent sailors chartering their ruggedly individualistic courses.

Barrier #3 Immunity: Built to Include

Beth Guckenberger, Director for Back2BAck ministries, tells a story about a foster home she engaged as she works with orphans and vulnerable children. The home had amazing structure, fun and relationships. Family time, homework time, dinnertime, craft time, potty time...you get the idea. A new child in the home resisted both the care and the organization at all times. The foster parents were patient, caring and persistent. Two weeks after placement in the home, at dinner one day, the new boy hurt another child. The foster father lost control, likely from pent up frustration with this child. When other staff showed up to help there was yelling, things flying in the air, and total pandemonium. Everyone was in chaos. In the middle sat this boy, still at the table and finally calm. Smiling. The worker asked him what he was experiencing and he said, "I did not understand this family, but this I understand." Chaos was his native language. In many cases, Christian leaders tend to think they are bringing a gift to those whom they minister. However, this child actually exposed faults in the family system. The helpful organization was keeping chaos at bay. The family was a highly refined defense mechanism from the pain and difficulties that life presents. Normally these defense mechanisms are good and allow people to function, holding back known and unknown threats and uncertainty. Yet these defense mechanisms also immunize against change, fear, and pain. Unrestrained, the defense mechanisms can actually prevent growth and even kill the family or group through the very methods used to protect it. Eminent Harvard researcher Robert Kegan calls this "immunity to change." The authors know from personal experience that foster care, disability, and trauma are very difficult experiences to engage. Yet the margins hold a hidden gift. In the midst of the chaos,

one's personal system can be seen more clearly. It is no longer possible to ignore the weakness for which the church has been coping. Confronted with one's own identity, it is necessary repent and change. Without this confrontation, we continue to inoculate ourselves from the growth and wholeness God offers. Much like the family that kept chaos at bay through planning and order, it is necessary to confront dysfunction often hidden under a careful mask. "90% of people do not know how to act around those with disabilities, and 70% say that they have fear when they see persons with disabilities" (Hubach 32). What if youth ministry on the margins could help people confront their fear, or more importantly, obey Jesus' command to "fear not?"

Barrier #4 Scarcity: The boat is bigger

One of Mike's favorite movies is Hotel Rwanda, far from a lighthearted movie, it is a tale of genocide. More than genocide, this story journeys with a hotel manager named Paul who moves radically away from a self-protective stance. Initially Paul hoards favors to protect those in his inner circle. Early in the movie, he is completely unwilling to expand the boundaries of his world to accept and identify with those who are not in his immediate circle of family. Ultimately, exposure to extreme need forced open his heart and hands. He went from careful protection to taking risk, from hoarding of resources to irresponsible generosity, from limited space to the understanding that "there is always room." Like Paul, maybe youth ministers do not engage the margins because they are afraid there is not enough room in their own boat.

Scarcity, the fourth barrier of ministry at the margins, is a belief that there is not enough to go around. Sociologists call it "limited good." Limited good, or a scarcity mindset is a belief that one person receiving something that I need limits my ability to

receive that good myself. There are endless stories of people destroying crops of neighbors because the neighbor's crops were so fruitful. The belief that there can only be so much harvest means that one person's success means another must fail. There are also countless stories of churches that turn away from "those kids." Mike has seen elders unable to imagine funding the youth outreach all while rebuilding an \$180,000 steeple on the church. One might challenge the salvation of those who invest massive money in buildings and refuse a \$500 youth outreach, but Christian leaders often do the same thing in their own way of thinking, relationships and programming.

What happens youth pastors see culture as zero sum, an environment of scarcity and violence in contested areas? With this view, leaders end up in culture wars or stained glass bunkers from which truth grenades can be thrown, with little risk in upsetting their own lives and experience. Often the rules of politics are all or nothing, The motto becomes "I cannot win without you losing something." This is also true of politics in the church. Playing to win at the cost of the other is very different from playing to change the game. If youth ministry is to retain its prophetic move to the margins it must also move away from a scarcity mindset.

Many envision the church as a lifeboat. But whose boat? God's plan to rescue people demands being on the lake and inviting others into the boat. The author's would like to pose two nuances to this metaphor. First, what if the church today is a rescue ship, but that ship abdicates its responsibility? A certain kind of person in the lake is unwelcome or avoided. That would be a fundamental failure of the mission. Second, what if the very people we think we are rescuing are actually able to rescue us. The margins confront inability, bias or fear and are a powerful teacher as we engage. Maybe

the hand being offered in help is truly being held out to us. God holds out his hand to us through those with disability and trauma.

A Call to the Margin

It is imperative to find the courage to get in the boat of God's activity. Maybe the current perspective that youth ministers are the rescuers is keeping them from being part of the larger story God is painting. Perfect programs that are not attended nor even accessible by those on the margins may keep the veneer of success while hiding failure. It is time to get in the boat of God's activity in our lives and the world around us. Welcome to margin, God has been waiting for us here. The next section of the paper will overview common approaches to disability ministry and their implementation.

Approaches to Disability Ministry

At 6pm on Sunday night, Johnny and his parents pull into the parking lot of the church they visited earlier in the day for morning worship. While chronologically 15, Johnny was adopted at age five from foster care following years of neglect from his biological parents and carries a diagnosis of high functioning autism. Because of the deficiencies of proper care in his early years, Johnny functions as an 8-year-old and benefits from the support of his parents in social situations and a 1:1 para-professional at school. While Johnny's parents know the church staff and volunteers do not have the same training as the staff at school, they are hopeful that Johnny can be supported in finding a place to engage within the church. During morning worship, Johnny's parents arrived with him early to look through the printed Sunday bulletin, helping Johnny know what to expect and what behaviors would be appropriate. They chose their seat on an aisle in case Johnny needed to use the restroom mid-service and brought noise-

canceling headphones, uncertain of what acoustics to expect. Also included in a tote bag for the service are several quiet fidgets and paper for drawing. With front-loading and support, Johnny was able to participate in worship appropriately with only one walk to the restroom mid-sermon.

Youth group is a different playing field than Sunday morning worship. While worship follows an intentional, even if implicit, liturgy that includes many similarities week to week, youth group functions according to social norms governed by the youth themselves. For many youth, youth on the margins, navigating social situations requires skills they have not yet acquired because of cognitive delays or the way traumatic experiences have altered pathways in their brain. In addition to the social skills necessary, some youth may struggle to participate due to the physical barriers. If the youth room and nearby restrooms are not handicap accessible, a segment of the population is implicitly unwelcome.

When Johnny and his parents walk into the youth room, they are met with loud music, blinking Christmas lights, and a group of boisterous teens preparing for a round of dodgeball. Immediately experiencing sensory overload, Johnny begins a repetitive rocking motion to calm himself, common in individuals with autism spectrum disorder. He is overwhelmed and not sure how or where to enter in. Johnny's parents tense, knowing that too much sensory input has the potential to trigger a meltdown in their child, but as visitors, they are unsure how to communicate their concern, and to which adult?

While youth ministry staff sometimes know a visitor will be coming, there are situations like Johnny's where the family or youth just appear having gathered meeting

information online. In those moments, it is important staff and volunteers have a basic understanding of the needs of kids on the margin to provide basic elements of a welcoming ethos, and typical youth group meetings build in practices sensitive to the needs of a variety of individuals.

Sensory stimuli need to be planned with intention in youth meeting areas. Spaces can be engaging without being overwhelming. Working with an interior designer or walking through a local special education classroom would offer helpful ideas for room design. Relationally, ministry staff and volunteers need to be equipped with sound practices of extending welcome to all visitors. Even when Johnny, a teen who would need extra support, arrived unannounced, a warm welcome from another teen and leader could have paved the way for a comfortable entrance, and the greeting could have pointed Johnny's parents towards the leader in charge to begin conversation about accommodations.

A thoughtful youth pastor could have invited Johnny's family to stay for the evening, allowing Johnny's parents to take the lead on knowing what support their son might need in this new space. The youth pastor and leaders could have observed and noted the ways Johnny's parents supported as the group moved from games to worship to a time of teaching. The youth pastor could have offered a follow up meeting time where the parents would be invited to share more about ways their son could be supported through the youth group routine. A buddy could be recruited and trained, so that over the course of a several weeks, Johnny's parents could step out of youth group for longer times until the buddy was comfortable anticipating and meeting Johnny's needs. Depending on Johnny's context, a meeting with the youth could also be planned to

explain Johnny's needs and to equip his peers to know how to best come alongside him.

While this scenario represents an ideal game plan to welcome a visitor with special needs, the reality is that many variables exist in the lives of the kids in every community, too many to anticipate. In addition, many churches are not fully equipped to pivot on the spot and create space for someone with unique needs. However, what if the church was ready? How many families, like Johnny's, could be welcomed into the community of the church?

Approach Zero

Scripture points towards welcome, hospitality and inclusion. Jesus did not avoid anyone on the margins, not margins created by their geographical background, their physical abilities, the consequences of their life choices or those of their parents, or their age. The message of the gospel is clearly one of inclusion, and as co-authors, our hearts grieve for the congregation that could not return the phone call of a family new to town or the congregation that could not bring care into the halls of a psychiatric unit. Both these scenarios are real experiences of the authors. These are the times the church is most needed. Yet these were churches living out an Approach Zero mentality. The reason that many youth on the margins are not in churches is not always that they choose not to be. Youth on the margins are not in local churches often because they cannot get in the door, make sense of the signage, or scale the stairs necessary to reach a second-floor youth room. Often social prejudices, physical layout or untrained staff implicitly exclude. Many youth would participate if they felt the welcome of staff and volunteers willing to accommodate, adjust, and extend extra grace to help them modify

aspects of the experience to participate alongside their peers. In short, they would attend if the space had been made welcome for them, if they had received more than Approach Zero.

Sometimes barriers can be physical and easy to identify. Other times, barriers are less obvious because they blend into the culture of “we’ve always done it this way,” and for someone who has attended the same congregation for many years, fresh eyes may be needed to notice things a new family would notice.

Demographics show that youth on the margins exist in every community. As mentioned earlier, twenty percent of the population has a diagnosable disability. When also considering individuals who bear less visible burdens such as experiences of trauma, family instability, foster care, and the siblings of youth on the margins, a massive group becomes evident that research clearly describes as under-served. This population’s rare participation in a church body tells volumes about the lack of accommodations available in that space. Educational researcher, Elliot Eisner, would deem this the “null curriculum” (Eisner 97-107). The null curriculum is not what is explicitly taught in a sermon or lesson, but the unspoken lessons that are taught through a set of behavioral cues, architectural decisions, and powerful silent rules. By offering no accommodations, the Approach Zero youth ministry is communicating that youth on the margin are not welcome. Approach zero ignores those who need accommodations, adjustments, or extra grace within their environment in order to participate.

Approach One, the 1:1

In this approach, one individual on the margins is paired with a “buddy” to help navigate the environment, providing extra assistance as needed, or available for a

supervised “break” while the group continues moving through the lesson as planned. At times, buddies might be needed only for a time of transition, and eventually, the youth becomes equipped to navigate the environment independently. Other times, buddies are permanent support.

A convenient way to facilitate the 1:1 approach is to train two individuals as buddies for one youth who needs support. The two buddies are provided contact information for one another and encouraged to work out their own schedule. This approach provides built-in back-up when someone is sick, traveling, or needs time off. Buddies are trained by both the church ministry staff utilizing published resources and training materials specific to the needs of the individual, as well as the family of the person receiving support.

Pros of this approach: This approach works well for smaller congregations who have limited resources. The 1:1 approach also affirms that each person in the body of the church matters and is worthy of inclusion in the greater whole. Many youth on the margin are able to participate at some level with the group, but either need support or to step away at times from the specifics or intensity of an activity. A buddy who has a relationship with the youth can anticipate the times when they need support or a break and provide that in a natural flow of interaction without disrupting the gathering.

Another benefit of the 1:1 approach is that it frees the ministry leader to continue leading most of the time. When the buddy can be trusted to handle the needs of the youth they are supporting, a gift of freedom is provided for the teaching staff person. Certainly, there may be times when staff needs to step in for support, but the hope is these times are rare.

At times, a youth may become escalated from an encounter or a specific trigger, and they may need intentional time to step away, encouragement to use appropriate coping skills, and “reset” before returning to the group. Sometimes this can be accomplished through a simple walk away from the group and the noise. The act of walking a repetitive route, mimicking a walking track helps the body focus away from the issue of concern. Learning to initiate a request for a walk before becoming overly escalated is a mature coping skill, so when a buddy encourages a walk, a healthy pattern is reinforced. At times when Laura’s son escalates, she has to take him by the hand or arm and initially force the walk, until he calms enough to recognize his need. As he begins walking, his body calms, and he no longer needs an adult to guide his steps.

Triggers are topics, words, sounds, smells, touch or any other type of input that reminds an individual of something undesirable from their past resulting in a strong emotional response. The smell of freshly baked oatmeal cookies might take someone back to their grandmother’s kitchen, reliving a happy memory. However, for those who have experienced trauma and for those with hypersensitivity to outside stimuli, the reaction can be the opposite. For a youth who has experienced physical abuse at home, any time a disagreement occurs, or voices escalate, they may anticipate being physically harmed and react in a strong and sometimes unusual way. If a youth experienced a significant loss on the 7th of June, any time the 7th of June comes, the date can trigger the same feelings of loss. The relationship of a buddy with an individual can sometimes anticipate and avoid uncomfortable triggers.

Before visiting a new church with her son, one of Laura’s questions focuses on the flow of the experience. How would he be expected to participate, and where would

the line between expectation and accommodation? Lev Vygotsky (1978) offers an understanding of the “zone of proximal development”. In brief, this zone represents how far a learner or participant can stretch when teachers or pastors provide appropriate supports, or as named by Vygotsky, “scaffolding”.

For example, Laura’s son does not enjoy sitting in a chair during a lesson, but he is capable of doing so for a short time. Laura’s son would tell you that he should be allowed to roam during a lesson, but because he is capable, he should be expected to do so for a moderate length of time. To allow Laura’s son to wander would be a disservice and would allow him to take advantage of the situation and not benefit from the conversation around the table. His zone of proximal development includes being able to sit for a short lesson with support. However, there are areas of seating that are better for him than others. There are people he will do better with if they are in proximity. Those are appropriate kinds of accommodations, or scaffolding as Vygotsky explains.

How does a ministry leader arrive at the appropriate level of accommodation and expectation? First, there will be some trial and error in the process as everyone learns about each other. Second, lean into the guidance offered by parents as they are usually the experts on their child and have been helping them navigate expectations for years. Finally, the place where you start need not be the place you stay.

Cons of this approach: While 1:1 relationship can be wonderfully supportive, a 1:1 cannot be in place immediately for a visitor. Buddies take time for training and rapport building. There are usually multiple meetings between parents, staff, and volunteers to equip a buddy with best practices, and the time it takes to establish this connection may

be a turn off to a family looking to quickly acclimate or occasionally drop in for a holiday service.

Approach two, Separate Space

In ministries that are typically larger and well resourced, a separate space for youth on the margins can be provided. Most often, these spaces operate on Sunday mornings concurrent with adult worship. A youth ministry outside of worship hours, dedicated to those with special needs is largely uncharted territory but could become a powerful reality in a larger community where a critical mass of participants dwell.

Separate space can exist on an “as needed” basis, allowing safe and comfortable space for a child or youth who needs to step away from the mainstream gathering for a time of de-escalation with the supervision of their buddy. Separate space can also serve as a functional classroom equipped to meet the needs of individuals who have special needs, such as specialized seating or bathrooms.

A separate space can include furniture and materials specifically designed for individuals on the margins, a high staff to participant ratio, and curriculum can be intentionally geared for the needs represented. Several Christian publishers offer curriculum for various age levels of special needs. Many congregations look to church members with experience in special education and parents for direction in designing intentional space. While there are many companies that specialize in equipment for dedicated special needs areas, there are also lower cost and DIY options.

Pro of this approach: Churches who are able to offer a separate space and a specialized curriculum for youth with special needs are likely to draw individuals with a higher level of need because access to extracurricular activities that allow for

accommodations is limited. While most states allow individuals with special needs to continue public education beyond age 18, each state sets their own rule as to when that ends, with an average age being 21. Thus, if a young adult is not capable of furthering their education in a trade or college courses and unable to maintain a job, there is nothing available to fill their day. Older parents may find themselves in full time parenting once again, this time to their adult children with special needs. Churches have a tremendous opportunity to enter here and meet a need. Families are looking for opportunities to give their youth and adult children with special needs meaning outside of the school classroom and once they graduate. Siblings can participate in sports, music, scouts, and community programs, but for many on the margins, these activities are out of reach. Providing appropriate space and opportunity for meaningful ministry to those on the margin has potential to impact families in transformative ways.

Con of this approach: Staffing and supporting a separate space can be labor intensive and costly. Initial training would need to be extensive, not only to equip the staff to meet a variety of needs, but to appropriately support the vision for the ministry. Starting a ministry from scratch is a daunting task in any setting! Once the church staff and board agreed that a specialized ministry is the leading of the Holy Spirit, it would be wise to begin with a time of research. A good place to begin would be to reach out to the local school district to learn about the special education classrooms and offerings already present in the community.

Approach three, a Hybrid

Many churches gravitate to a hybrid approach where there are times, events, and topics that are appropriate for a youth on the margins and times when the situation is

not appropriate. To be effective utilizing a hybrid approach, communication between staff and parents/guardians needs to be ongoing. Staff need to plan ahead and make the ministry schedule consistently available ahead of time. This would also include publishing the titles of movie clips and music that might be a source of concern or trigger for youth. Parents/guardians can research titles or preview material to explore appropriateness and make decisions regarding the attendance of a student.

Parents/guardians would need to remain committed to accessing the schedule and asking questions of the staff if something is unclear. Arrangements might be made for a youth to participate in portions of a ministry gathering but to have space and a buddy to step away as needed. For other topics, it might be more appropriate for a youth to take the night off. Ongoing conversation between ministry staff and parents make for wise decisions in each situation.

Pros of this approach: This approach communicates the value of everyone as made in the *imago Dei* (image of God). Parents/guardians would need to commit to frequent contact with the staff. In addition, for the staff, each exchange would be an opportunity to affirm the value of the youth as accommodations are worked out. These positive interactions flow naturally out into the church community and in the network of families with kids who have special needs. The testimony of a family well-served communicates far more than any direct mailer. One family invites another, and the group grows organically.

For smaller to mid-size churches, this approach allows most youth to participate to some degree without a burden on resources. Engagement can be viewed in an ala-carte model where a youth and their parents look at the events on the church calendar

and determine what elements will be the best choice for their children or youth based on available accommodations and needs.

Cons of this approach: This approach can be labor intensive as staff time is regularly committed towards assessing whether each ministry topic or activity is appropriate and/or making adjustments. The hybrid also demands that ministry staff are planning consistently, so that topics and media are shared with families in advance, so decisions of participation can be made. This approach necessitates a commitment to relationship between the ministry staff and family, so important conversation can take place regularly and in a timely manner.

Conclusion

The need for ministry to youth on the margins is all around in every community served by the local church. As the church grows in awareness of God's children, there are tangible choices to ensure a welcoming ethos, many necessitating only a change of framework and approach. Other changes come with expense, often depending on the age of the building space available. Yet all change made in the name of welcoming inclusion paves the way to fulfill the Great Commission. Sometimes by "going out into all the world," youth ministers may miss the kids in their own backyards who might need a little extra love and care to make the journey of discipleship. May youth ministry set the bar for the church as they take intentional steps towards creating community where all can experience love and grace.

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