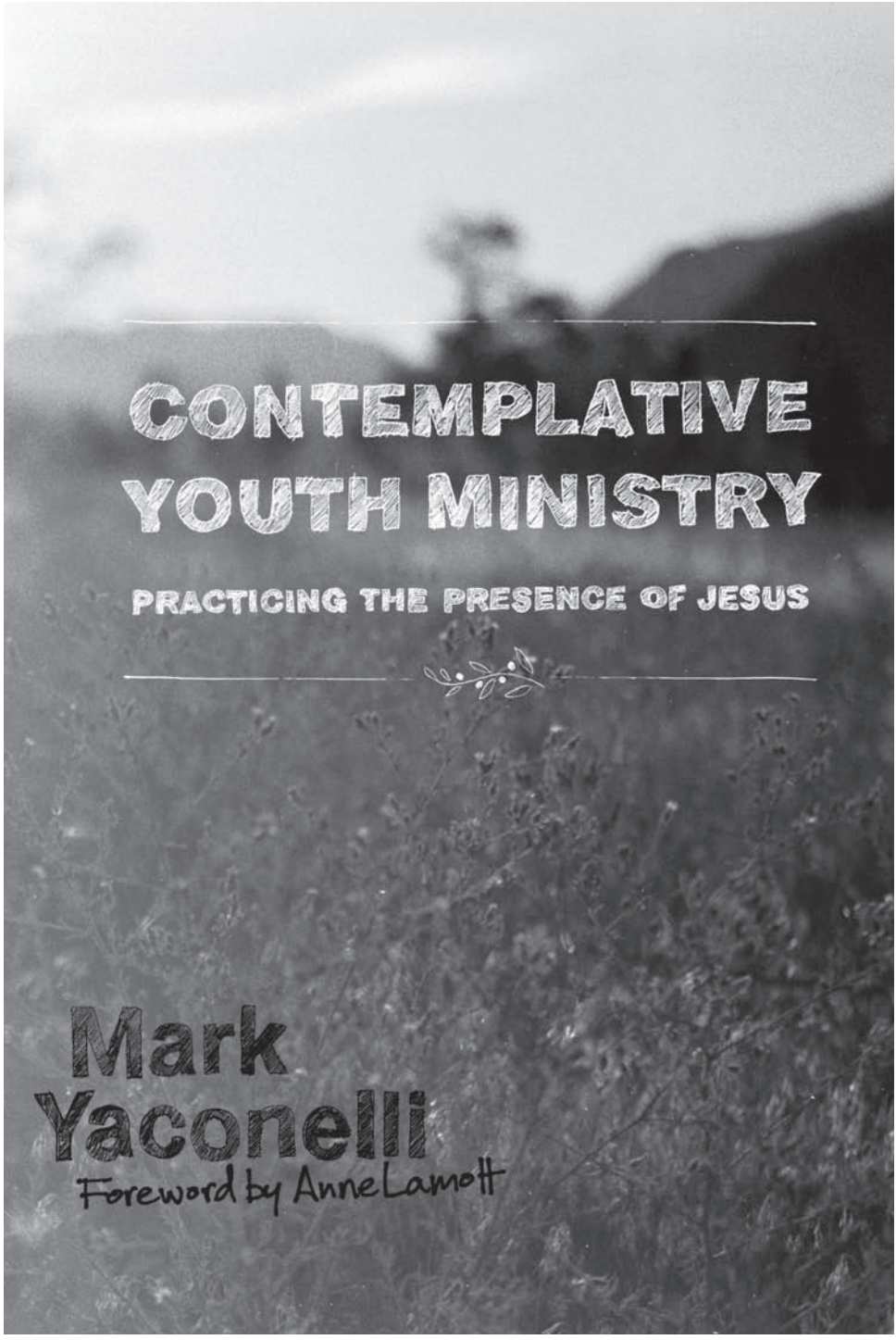

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Contents

teen angst and adult anxiety

1

In our age everything has to be a "problem." Ours is a time of anxiety because we have willed it to be so. Our anxiety is not imposed on us by force from outside. We impose it on our world and upon one another from within ourselves.

Sanctity in such an age means, no doubt, traveling from the area of anxiety to the area in which there is no anxiety or perhaps it may mean learning, from God, to be without anxiety in the midst of anxiety.

—THOMAS MERTON, *THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE*

I've really begun to understand what deeply spiritual people teenagers are. (Silly to have forgotten, when I was one myself.) Even the scruffiest middle-schooler is on a seriously beautiful, completely unique journey, as we all are, and have been, even when we were little kids. Understanding that has perhaps been the best fruit that contemplative prayer has yielded in my relationship with young people.

—MELISSA RANGE, POET, YOUTH MINISTRY VOLUNTEER, OAKHURST BAPTIST CHURCH, DECATUR, GEORGIA

Teenagers make adults anxious. They just do. In fact, adult anxiety about teens may be the primary reason youth ministry exists.

Spot a cluster of unfamiliar young people laughing outside the church, and adults get suspicious. If these youth happen to paint their lips black or jump skateboards off the church steps, adults can get downright fearful. Adult anxiety toward teens is ancient, even biblical. In the only scene we're given from Jesus' adolescence, the young Messiah sneaks away from his family and hides out in Jerusalem. When his mother finally rushes into the temple and discovers her holy middle-schooler, she cries frantically, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!" (Luke 2:48). It turns out that even the teenage Prince of Peace can make adults crazy with worry.

There are many reasons why adults feel anxious around teens. Young people are fidgety. They fiddle with things and won't stay still. They exaggerate and mirror adult postures that make us self-conscious and uncomfortable. They always seem to be looking for something—a friend, an adventure, a ride, food, acceptance, a glimpse of who they're becoming. Youth can voice their questions with such open-hearted honesty that we find ourselves blushing. Sometimes their neediness or suffering can be obvious in a way that leaves us feeling helpless or despondent.

Young people are green. They can make adults feel tired, musty, and unattractive. Emerging from childhood, teens move toward adulthood with fresh eyes and energy. They see white elephants. They ask the obvious and un-faced questions: "Why do we have to go to church when Jesus never did?" "How come you tell me not to drink alcohol when you have a beer every night?" "Why are these benches called pews?" Just the presence of young people within a community of adults exposes weaknesses, raises doubts, and challenges assumed values.

Young people can be disturbingly (or is it refreshingly?) unpredictable. One day they seem happy to conform to their parents' wishes and adult conventions; the next day it appears they're making it up as they go along, led zigzag by an internal drummer that even they don't seem to recognize. Young people can express a childlike dependency one moment, then get offended by the lack of independence they're granted the next. Youth are messy. Take this example:

Three years ago while traveling on a bus full of young people, I noticed I was seated near five or six teenage girls. At the time, my wife and I were expecting our first daughter, and I was eager to learn about the relationships between these teenage girls and their fathers. I asked the girls if they would be willing to tell me about their relationships with their fathers and to offer any advice they thought helpful. Although these young women were from all over North America and represented diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, I was surprised at how all the girls in this particular group spoke in very similar, adoring tones about their dads. Then one 15-year-old said, "Of course, you have to be prepared for times when your daughter might say to you, 'I hate you, Daddy!' But usually by the next day you'll get a handmade card that says something like, 'You're the greatest dad in the world.'"

Bewildered, I looked at her and asked if any of them had enacted this kind of behavior with their own fathers. All but one nodded in agreement. I was incredulous. I asked what had prompted them to use such extreme language. One girl replied, "Well, it can be anything, really. Like, a couple of months ago I stopped talking to my dad after he wore black socks and sandals to pick me up from school. But other times I've said similar things for really no reason at all." When I asked them why, they just shrugged their shoulders. "It's just something we do," one of them offered. Youth make adults anxious.

One thing that becomes increasingly disturbing for many grown-ups is the sense that they have little control over young people. This scares adults. Adults want youth to conform to adult standards. They

want kids to act responsibly. They want them to sit down and listen. They want them to hurry up and get their identities fixed and grounded. Adults want youth to have a roadmap for a secure and reasonable future, and they get rattled when they notice that most youth aren't carrying one.

Youth workers aren't immune from these anxieties. We worry about the young people in our care. We don't know what they look at on the Internet. We can't keep up with the electronic gadgets they play with. We've never heard of the bands or celebrities they talk about. We don't know what they do after school. We're unaware of the subject or codes in their e-mail conversations. Even the most hip youth ministers can sometimes feel like they really don't understand young people at all.

Perhaps one source of these adult anxieties is the growing separation between youth and adults. For the past 40 years, economic policies, changes in social norms, and a relentless marketing strategy to create and sell to a teenage market have combined to create what sociologist Christian Smith calls a "structural disconnect" between adults and youth.[4] This separation begins long before adolescence. Many youth spend most of their childhoods segregated in daycares and schools, afternoons and evenings in front of televisions and computers, weekends hanging out with friends. By early adolescence most young people are attuned to a different reality, a different world, than adults.

The less contact adults have with young people, the more mysterious they seem. Adults can fall into the traps of projection, speculation, worry, and fearful imaginings. Congregations and church leaders find themselves relying on the media to learn about kids. They absorb stories about teenage gangs and violence. They watch videos and movies that portray youth as hormone-driven, sex-crazed nymphs. They hear news stories and government reports that talk alarmingly about "at-risk" kids. All of this becomes a filter for how young people are

[4] *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 182.

perceived. Adults see teenagers in baggy jeans and oversized jackets and fear they're hiding drugs or weapons. They see a group of young women in short halter tops and lipstick and worry about their sexual activity.

Sadly, most adults are unable to see the truth—that drug use and sexual promiscuity among youth have continually decreased over the past 20 years. So much so that Bill Strauss, co-author with Neil Howe of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* claims, "Never before has there been a generation that is less violent, less vulgar, less sexually charged than the culture being offered them." We fail to recognize it's the adult culture that is far more "at-risk" than the youth culture. Strauss claims, "We need a youth committee on adult drug abuse, not the other way around." But many of us believe the story the media and culture tell us about youth. We don't take the time to get to know our youth as they really are. Instead we view them through the media lens. We see them not as our children, or even as people; we see them as a dangerous tribe, a marauding cluster of "at-risk" statistics evoking fear and apprehension.

Sometimes adult fears about youth arise from what we *do* know. Adults get scared when young people reflect behaviors and attitudes we recognize. Adolescent desires for pleasure, material goods, entertainment gadgets, constant activity, sex, and mood-altering substances all mirror the behavior of the adult culture—and it scares us. There is much we adults don't like about ourselves. There are mistakes parents have made and want their kids to avoid. We get frightened when youth begin to reflect the ambiguous values and conduct of the adult culture.

I remember the mother of a teenager in my church youth group who was terrified her daughter was going to start smoking. She brought her daughter to church hoping she would get involved with "good" kids and healthy activities. This mom questioned me obsessively after every retreat and camp event to see if her daughter had

been smoking. The reason she was scared? She had started smoking in high school and even as an adult was unable to stop the habit. Often the things we adults fear most in our youth are the issues we haven't resolved in ourselves. Thomas Hines, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, writes that we fear youth because "we want them to grow into healthier, wealthier, and wiser versions of ourselves." When they don't appear to be on that path, adults get scared.

Maybe what's most unsettling about youth is the way in which they remind many of us of our own adolescent hearts. Young people can stir up forgotten dreams and evoke unmet longings within adults. They can unearth the contradictions between the hopeful vision of our younger selves and the mediocre and muddled reality of our adult lives. Whatever the particular cause, the truth is that when adults relate to teenagers out of anxiety we miss seeing them, we miss hearing them, and we lose our sense of compassion for them.

Anxiety is the inability to be present. It's a state of agitation in which we lose our larger capacity to empathize, to love, to respond to the needs of others. When we're anxious we become squirrel-like—nervous and wary, teeth chattering, eyes scanning for danger, muscles spring-loaded, waiting to scamper up the nearest tree at every sound. Anxiety comes from words that denote "to choke." When we're anxious we can't breathe. We feel life closing in, leaving fewer and fewer choices. We find ourselves unable to discern real fears from reactive worry. We lose patience, and we're unable to trust. We get suspicious, distancing ourselves from others, ourselves, and even God. We become lost in our heads, caught up in fearful thoughts and calculations. Our minds oscillate between the future and the past. We worry about what should have happened or fear what might take place. In anxiety we lose touch with what's driving us. Our actions become self-protective, reactive, and compulsive.

It would be an overstatement to say that anxiety is the only adult response to young people. There are many instances when a young

person's presence can be an unexpected grace that lifts a grown-up's spirit like a sudden gift of flowers. Youth can be unabashedly friendly and welcoming in a way that wipes away the clouds of mistrust or dourness many adults live behind. Youth are often playful, drawing energy and new life to the surface of adult lives and communities. Young people can be passionate about God and ultimate meaning in a way that elevates or even carries the faith of those around them. They can embody a heartfelt compassion for suffering and marginalized people that is revelatory to adults. They can ask the hard questions that help adult communities see hidden problems or possibilities.

There are many more positive ways, not to mention ordinary ways, in which adults respond and relate to young people. Yet the primary reaction to teens within Christian communities and the culture at large seems to be anxiety.

As a result most youth ministries in North America are ministries of anxiety. In fact, most Christian communities don't even consider the spiritual needs of young people until there's a critical mass of anxious adults. Look behind most youth ministry programs and you'll find pastors and church boards nervous about declining memberships, parents afraid their kids lack morals, congregations worried the Christian faith has become irrelevant to younger generations, and the persistent frustration among adults that something ("anything!") needs to be done with "those kids!"

Teen Angst

Of course, adults aren't the only ones with anxieties. Perhaps the second most common reason youth ministries exist is that teenagers have their own anxieties about adults. Adults make teenagers anxious. They just do.

I once asked a group of graduating high school students to give me their impressions of adulthood. For the next hour kids shared their observations and experiences with parents, teachers, and various adults in the community. As the discussion began to wind down, I handed out paper and pencils and asked the kids to craft a one-sentence definition of adulthood based on our discussion. The room was silent for a minute or two, as the youth wrote and reflected on what they had heard. I then asked the young people to share what they had written. The first young man to respond said, "Well, as I heard our conversation and thought about my own experiences with adults, I wrote this definition: 'Adults have no friends, adults have no passions, and adults are stressed out.'"

Adults have no friends, adults have no passions, and adults are stressed out. In a single sentence, this young person was able to articulate the fear I have felt among most young people during my 15 years of youth ministry. More and more it appears to me that this definition represents the nightmare of adulthood most young people are trying to escape. Is it any wonder there are 30-year-olds still living in their parents' house, still trying to make it in a rock band? Maybe they're trying to hang on to their friends. Maybe they're trying to keep their passions alive. Maybe they see the grey-suited adults working in cubicles, burdened with responsibility, and they get frightened.

Young people are about energy. They have bodies that want to move, they have emotions they want to express, and they have developing relationships that are incredibly interesting and important to them. Adults—especially in a faith community—are about status quo. They want young people to listen, to behave, to be still, to stop talking, to soothe adult fears, to fulfill mission statements, and to support programs. This makes young people wary and anxious.

I once interviewed for a youth ministry position at a church in which part of the interview was done by a group of young people. When I asked what kind of youth ministry they envisioned, they said

things like, "Something that's not boring." "Lots of trips and retreats." "We want to be able to hang out with friends." "Lessons about real stuff we care about—not just what adults care about."

As they continued to talk, I sensed that their comments were rooted in their fears about the church.

- Fear that the church wants youth to be passive.
- Fear that youth programs will be about meeting the needs of the adults.
- Fear that the real purpose of youth ministry is to make youth "nice."
- Fear that the youth ministry will be a form of babysitting.
- Fear that there will be only talking and no action.
- Fear that the ministry will be another activity in which youth have no voice.
- Fear that the ministry will have nothing to do with real life.
- Fear that they will have to hide their real thoughts, fears, desires, and experiences.
- Fear that youth will become as muted, controlled, and stressed as the adults in the congregation.
- Fear that there is something in Christianity that really matters, yet it will remain hidden.

The anxieties and fears young people hold regarding adults and churches are real. Yet ministries that respond only to teenage anxiety will mimic the media's frenetic activity that seeks only to keep the attention of young people, without any concern for the growing hunger of the adolescent soul.

God Makes Us Anxious

For many adults, there's an even deeper anxiety than the ones I've mentioned—and it has a profound effect on our ministries with

youth. It's the very real fear that the Christian faith is really about risk, about breaking free, about becoming vulnerable to the suffering in the world, about living as an open-hearted person.

A few years ago I was invited to a session meeting for a local Presbyterian church to talk about youth ministry. Instead of my normal presentation, I asked the adults to tell me why they started coming to church. Surprisingly, I found that almost all of them began attending church after they had children. They began attending church because they thought it would be good for their kids. They wanted the church to help their kids learn the values and morals of the Christian faith. As we talked further, we realized all of them were repeating the practices of their own parents. All of the session members were raised in families that began attending church when the children were young and then left the church once the children reached late adolescence. I asked how this had affected them. There was silence. Then one adult said, "Well, it didn't have much of an effect...except once I became parent, I thought I should probably start taking my kids to church."

I suggested that simply taking their kids to church or youth group would probably garner the same results. I explained that the purpose of youth ministry isn't just to help young people learn morality, as important as that is; it's to help them enter into the alternative way of life that Jesus offers. It's to help young people unmask the principalities and powers that seek to bind us—to help them live in freedom. It's to help youth learn the practices, understandings, and disposition that will keep them close to the Source of life revealed in Jesus Christ.

"Well, that's all well and good," offered one parent, "but I think that's more than we're after." Heads nodded around the room. "I think we just want our kids to, you know, learn the Ten Commandments and be kind to others—the kind of values Jesus was promoting."

"Yes," chimed another session member, "We don't need our kids to be Jesus, we just want them to participate in the church."

I paused and then told them that if they wanted their kids to learn morals, they probably could just take them to a scouting program. I asked if there was a deeper desire within their decision to bring their kids to church. I tried to explain that the purpose of the church was to help people live the Christian faith and that the Christian faith wasn't focused on morality. I tried to explain that the Christian faith is about following Jesus; it's about falling in love with God. It's about seeking to become so transparent to the Spirit of God that you are no longer sure which actions are your own and which ones are God's. I tried to explain that youth ministry isn't really about church memberships—it's about helping kids live in the freedom and compassion of Jesus. I tried to explain that morality was simply a by-product of loving God and bringing that love out into the world!

I sensed the adults were curious, but didn't know how to respond. People looked down in embarrassment. I became embarrassed. The pastor cleared his throat and in a voice that hinted "Okay, we've had enough out of you!" he said, "Yes, terrific! Thanks so much for your words of encouragement. I think we're done here and need to move on to the next item on the agenda." He then stood and escorted me to the door.

Sometimes it's difficult for us to admit that Jesus came to offer us another way of life—one that involves more than being a good citizen, obeying the law, recycling your garbage, and attending church on Sunday. Although many adults try to ignore Jesus' life of passionate freedom and relationship, youth are drawn to it.

Years ago as I tucked my sons, Noah (age four) and Joseph (age two), into bed, I was singing them a song I had learned as a boy that contained the word *Christian*. Noah asked, "Dad, what's a 'Christian'?" A sudden panic came over me. This was an important opportunity to share my faith! I needed to proceed carefully. I reviewed all the strategies in which I'd been trained. Testimony? No, too long. I'd risk putting him to sleep. Exegesis on Philippians 2? Might be too heady. Plus, I'd

have to go into a historical-critical description of Pauline theology, not to mention the concepts of kenosis and atonement. Maybe a brief historical sketch of the council of Nicea, culminating with a pictographic version of the Nicene Creed? Could be complicated.

My son interrupted, "Well, Dad, what does it mean?"

Before I could gather my thoughts, I found myself blurting, "Well, Noah, it means 'little Christ.' People who are trying to live like Jesus call themselves Christians."

Noah paused, pondered this definition, and then said, "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes I am," I replied.

Noah stood still, thought for a moment, and then said, "How do you become a Christian?" I explained that you simply say to God with all your heart, "I want to join Jesus in loving you and loving others," and then you try to live your life like Jesus. Noah thought this over and then said, "Okay. Let's do it." We sat together on his bed and prayed a simple prayer while two-year-old Joseph jumped and tumbled behind us.

The boys brushed their teeth, listened to a bedtime story, and climbed into bed. Soon they began to drift into slumber. As I got up to leave, Noah said to me, "Dad, I don't think I want to be a Christian." I paused, surprised he was still awake.

"Why is that, Noah?" I whispered.

"Well, Jesus gets killed by the soldiers doesn't he?"

"Yes...he does," I said hesitantly. Then with calm assurance I offered, "But God raises him and his Spirit is still with us today."

"I know that Dad...but I don't want to get killed."

Silence. "Don't worry," I said, rubbing his back, "you're not going to get killed. That happened a long time ago."

He yawned and with his eyes closed said, "Yes, but if Jesus is still with us today, it can happen again." Pause. Yawn. "I don't think I want to be a Christian, Dad."

"Okay, Noah," I said, brushing his hair. "Okay."

Noah realized that being a Christian has consequences. That living a life of love often results in suffering. That being like Jesus doesn't mean simply being nice and having good morals—it often means facing the pain and evil in the world. And I realized that night why many people resist the real purpose of youth ministries. That night I wasn't sure if I wanted my kids to be Christians—to "pick up their cross and follow Jesus."

I understood that night why many adults and youth simply want youth ministries that provide morals and safe social activities, without all the weird stuff about growing in the image of Christ. It's difficult for parents to trust their children to God. Look what happened to Jesus! Look what happened to the disciples! Look what happened to his friends, those we point to as saints! Parents, church members, and youth might want Christian values and assurances, but we don't want the life of Jesus.

Jesus makes us uncomfortable, causes us to question our daily practices. Jesus' life reminds us of the realities of suffering, hostility, hatred, and resistance that often accompany any attempts at living in truth and love. When kids learn to live in the Spirit of Jesus, they may no longer fit in. They may become outcasts. They may develop a costly compassion for others. They may become more vulnerable to the pain and loneliness of the world. They may be drawn to live life on the margins.

Being a Christian isn't safe. You can lose your life. You can lose your reputation. You can lose your relationship with a loved one.

Yet as I reflected on my interaction with Noah, I realized there is a worse fate than facing the suffering and violence of this world. More than I want to keep Noah safe from harm, I want Noah and all of my children to live. I want them to become fully alive. I want them to know Jesus so they will know how to keep their hearts soft. I want them to know God so they'll be intimately connected to the Source of life. I want them to be Christians so they'll know how to give and receive love—so they'll avoid the burned-out life of materialism that deadens spirits and kills creativity. But I have to admit, all of this scares me at some level.

A friend of mine who is a youth minister and a committed Christian called me one evening after receiving a phone call from her college-age son. She sounded distressed as she told me her son had decided to leave his studies to join a group of Americans going to Iraq to be with Iraqi civilians during the U.S. bombing and occupation. The group hoped that by being a visible presence as American citizens they might be able to protect the lives of civilians, as well as increase awareness about the suffering of Iraqis back in the States. My friend was upset and told her son he had made a commitment to college and this was no time to engage in radical politics. I asked how her son responded. She sighed, and there was quiet over the phone line for a moment. Then she answered with a sob in her voice. "He said, 'But Mom, this isn't politics. This is about following Jesus. We're going as a Christian group. Didn't you and the church teach me that Jesus was always befriending people who were weak and suffering?'" I waited in silence. I could hear her crying. Then finally she said, "He's right, you know, Mark. I know he's right. But if I knew he was going to do something like this, I would've taken him out of the church and raised him to be a Chippendale dancer."

Rooted and Grounded in Anxiety

In response to the anxiety of adults (they're the ones with the power, after all!), most congregations create youth ministries that are about control and conformity. When we're anxious, we want control, we want answers, we want concrete and measurable results. We want our ducks in a row. In youth ministry this means most adults want programs and professionals. Church leaders want experts and predictable systems that will remove the doubt and ambiguity surrounding most interaction with young people. Congregations want discipleship formulas that will guarantee their kids will become moral and faith-filled believers.

When youth ministry responds to the anxiety of adults, it becomes restrictive and deadening. God's freeing presence and the at-risk life of Jesus are downplayed. Kids are taught to conform to the tradition, practices, and doctrines of the congregation. Soon the youth ministry loses its ability to discover something new, to question and embrace the pain and suffering of life. The ministry becomes safe, revolving around answers and false assurances. The youth are quarantined. They're placed at the margins—incubated in basements or gathered at off hours when the congregation won't be disturbed. The ministry becomes more and more unreal, causing those young people who won't conform to become disruptive or swallow their real questions and struggles.

Other youth ministries are created in response to adolescent anxieties. Noticing young people's discomfort with adult forms of faith and desperately seeking to keep youth engaged, some churches develop ministries of distraction. Inspired by parachurch youth ministries from the 1950s, like Youth for Christ and Young Life (whose founder, Jim Rayburn, once wrote a book entitled *It's a Sin to Bore a Kid*), ministries of distraction keep youth moving from one activity to the next: rafting trips, pizza parties, game nights, ski retreats, beach fests, music festivals, amusement parks, taco-feeds, scavenger-hunts,

crowd-breakers, raves, skits, and whatever other activities attract kids. It's a Nickelodeon approach to youth ministry that seeks to appeal to kids' propensity for fun and recreation. This is how churches respond to youth who cry "Church is boring!" It's the ministry of excitement; discipleship through fun, culture-friendly, "Christian-lite" events. Like parents who pop in a video to entertain the kids when relatives arrive, the idea is to keep the young people from running out, to keep them in the general vicinity of the church, to keep them happy until they're mature enough to join the congregation.

While such ministries may keep youth entertained, they often keep youth distracted from the deeper rhythms and practices of the Christian faith. Programs and activities are chosen based on the level of excitement that's generated. No one wants to act like an adult for fear of scaring the kids. Leaders become hesitant to engage youth in any activity that is in contrast to the consumer culture. Prayer, spiritual exercises, theological conversation, and spiritual disciplines that challenge the status quo are dumped out of fear that youth may cry "This is like school!" or "You're just like our parents!" or (worst of all) "This is boring." So the ministry never addresses the deeper needs of youth, never challenges them to explore the alternative way of Jesus. Like children's television programming that seeks to keep kids attentive so they'll watch the commercials, our ministries of diversion respond to young people's most carnal appetites so we can slip in a five-minute Bible study or parade them through the church building.

Ministry programs that respond to the anxieties of adults or youth are incapable of awakening kids to the freedom of God. Rather than trusting the presence of God, these reactive ministries put their faith in attendance, conversions, and confirmation class sizes. To get the necessary results and to assuage fears, they become more and more about control and manipulation. Kids know, even when they can't articulate it, when a ministry is concerned with control and

manipulation. They know when the purpose of the ministry is to alleviate fear. They know when ministries are simply about protecting young people from the realities of life.

Once young people recognize that youth ministry is really about quelling anxiety one of two things can happen. If the ministry is uninteresting or provides few social opportunities, the young people will eventually leave. If the ministry provides youth with fun outings, entertainment, and occasions to socialize, kids are happy to play along and ease the fears of the congregation. They assent to being paraded in front of congregations ("Don't worry, the church isn't dying!"), doted on by congregational leaders ("No fear! Your financial allocations are producing results!"), and photographed for the church newsletter ("Have no doubts, Christianity is alive and well!"). As long as there are trips to Disneyland, church dances, and the annual summer Jamaican mission trip, they're happy to pretend. Just don't expect them to be around once they leave high school—or when the program budget dries up. That's when they'll have to get on with the real stuff of life.