



DAVE KISTLER

Death by Maintenance

"Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Mark 10:14)

For the last ten years, I have been observing a disturbing trend in fundamental churches. The number of young people who attend faithfully is rapidly declining. Not a revelation to you, probably. What may be a revelation are the following additional observations. One, the seeming lack of concern over this trend. And, two, the accelerating age of most congregations. The "average" age of the typical fundamental Baptist church-goer is now 50-55 years old. The enormity of this dangerous trend is punctuated almost weekly in our meetings.

Though we may miss the next generation, Jesus certainly would not. In Mark 10:14, a verse that comes right on the heels of His teaching on the subject of divorce, Jesus rebukes his disciples and says, "Suffer the little children to come...and forbid them not..." Though normally used for small children, the phrase "little children" is used in Mark 5:39 to refer to a 12 year old girl (basically a teenager). With Jesus, young people (teens) - the ones most affected by the ravages of divorce - were two things. First, young people were a PERMITTED thing. "Suffer" literally means to "permit" or "allow." The strength of the language actually means "permit this AT ONCE." Jesus wanted His disciples to immediately stop hindering young people's approach to Him and "at once" allow them to come. The disciples must have viewed themselves as the "protectors" of Jesus in keeping these precious young people from Him. No doubt the disciples' motives were noble. They did not want Jesus to be troubled with the barrage of young ones who wanted to get to Him. Surely, He needed a break from the incessant flow of people. However Jesus emphatically states that "of such is the kingdom of heaven". In like fashion today, some see themselves as the "protectors" of the church property and discourage aggressive outreach to today's teens for fear of the detrimental effect on the facilities. Still others feel they must protect the "traditions" of the church, so they never adapt, at all, in order to impact today's youth.

Second, young people were, to Jesus, a PRIORITY thing. He says, "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (literally "it is those with the qualities these children possess (simple trust) who will make up my kingdom"). To further emphasize their priority, Jesus says, in 10:15, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God AS A LITTLE CHILD, he cannot enter therein." Jesus loved, and longed to minister to, the young people of His generation.

I fear that we, preachers, have begun to view our contemporary youth as a burdensome thing. In case you don't think that is the case, simply try to organize a youth outreach in your community. You will hear every excuse imaginable for why it won't work. Everything, from their manners to their music is mentioned as a "reason" for not even attempting to evangelize this current generation. Yet, we must make young people both PERMITTED and a PRIORITY. If we don't, a generation will go to hell and the church will go leaderless.

All of this to say that I was so encouraged by the incredible participation I saw at the first ever "HIS SPACE", multi-church, youth rally held at Command Baptist Church in Statesville, NC, this past weekend (July 26-28). This evangelistic outreach/youth conference was the burden of Jodi Cook (youth director at Command Baptist) and the youth sponsors of five other area churches. It was my delight to preach two of the three nights, under our H.O.P.E. tent, to eager and energetic teens and adults. In addition to the 15 who were saved, I witnessed an incredible spirit of cooperation among the teens. They were mimicking the spirit they saw modeled by their sponsors. I cannot say enough about Jodi Cook and his vision to reach the teens of Statesville and all of Iredell County. His aggressive approach to outreach is in need of duplication across America. In addition, I commend Pastor Jim Morgan (Command Baptist) for his willingness to think and act outside the box. He is a man I greatly respect, admire and love. These men are not content to maintain. Rather, they desire to impact the next generation for Christ.

One concluding thought is in order. I recently heard a pastor friend make the following incredibly profound statement. "We've moved from shining the light, to merely maintaining the lighthouse." Reaching this generation of teens is "Light-shining" ministry at its best. May the destructive trend of "maintaining" be immediately reversed by the power of God's gracious Spirit. If it is not, death will certainly be the result.

The following statistics appeared in USA Today on August 7, 2007 (survey conducted by Lifeway Research, Nashville, TN in April and May of 2007)

-7 of 10 evangelical young people (ages 18-30) who went to church regularly in high school dropped out totally by age 23

-51% of evangelical youth viewed church members as "caring"

-48% of evangelical youth viewed church members as "welcoming"

-42% of evangelical youth viewed church members as "authentic"

-97% cited life changes (such as a move) as their reason for dropping out of church

-58% of church dropouts were unhappy with the people or pastor

-52% cited ethical reasons (hypocrisy, moral failure) as their reason for quitting church

"Too many youth groups are holding tanks with pizza. There's no life transformation taking place. People are looking for a faith that can change them in a changing world."

Ed Stetzer, Director of Lifeway Research, Nashville, TN

"Unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt."

Robert Wuthnow, Author of "After the Baby Boomers"
(a book due out in September)

Dave Kistler

President,

H.O.P.E Ministries International

www.hopeministriesonline.com

Email comments to:

davekistler@hopeministriesonline.com

We appreciate your input, but please understand that due to the volume of email that we receive, we are unable to personally respond to each email.