

Report on Joint Youth Groups

Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA

Spring 2015

Introduction

As a portion of my work with Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA during my sabbatical year from Bluffton University, I was asked to do some research on the viability and sustainability of the implementation of joint youth groups among multiple congregations. My efforts of pulling information together involved speaking directly with the parties involved in the Conference where joint youth groups exist, namely Wayne and Columbiana counties, speaking with conference ministers of some of the MC USA conferences to ascertain their experience with joint youth groups among their constituency, and also initiating a Google chat on the topic with the help of Denominational Youth Minister Rachel Gerber, which involved 10 people from around the country who were interested in the subject. I will outline below why the questions regarding joint youth groups have arisen, advantages and disadvantages of its implementation, and what I perceive as “Best Practices” related to the praxis of joint youth group programs.

Historical Perspective

An era of youth ministry called the “youth fellowship” era (1930s-1970s) was the result of a sizeable demographic of teenagers existing in congregational life and the desire to give them a social outlet because of the various societal influences that made adolescence a distinct developmental category where an increasing amount of expendable free time was being experienced. Compulsory high school attendance, expectation of college enrollment and career exploration, and later in life marital expectations were increasingly replacing the scenario where previously the approximate age of 16 marked the time when young people began to exist in the adult world on a comparable level of older adults because of their participation in the work force and their striving for independence. Youth fellowship became the social outlet for this large group of adolescents in congregational life. All denominations were experiencing this increasing demographic heightened by the baby boomer generation (1946-1964).

As I visited with Ohio Conference pastors, many of them mentioned the fact that years previously there had been active youth fellowships in their congregations, but the more recent experience has been a decreasing demographic of adolescents. Many families are choosing to have fewer children and also many of the Conference churches are experiencing a decline in overall attendance. Some pastors have also shared the increasing presence of blended and single family groups in congregational life as causing a lack of consistency in attendance for young people because of going back and forth between parents on the week-ends as a result of custody agreements.

The decreasing demographic of youth in congregational life has caused some churches to consider partnering with other neighboring churches in order to have enough youth to include in a joint youth group that would make it viable. Currently there appear to be two such groups in the Ohio Conference: a group of Wayne County churches (Crown Hill, Martins, Salem, Orrville, and Chestnut Ridge), and also a group of Columbiana County churches (Leetonia,

Midway, and North Lima). Pastors in other regions have raised questions as to whether this is a direction they should consider for the immediate future.

Advantages

The apparent advantages that were identified of having joint youth groups with other churches are as follows:

1. **Shared resources.** Involving more than one congregation increased the number of youth who would be available to get together for a youth group event, which is obvious. Multiple congregations can also draw upon more people and financial resources than one congregation alone can do. Youth group fundraisers have more success when spread out among several congregations as opposed to one congregation needing to come up with the resources for attending a major youth convention, for instance. Some congregations also have a difficult time finding youth sponsors, but when more than one congregation can share the load, it's possible to have more adult leadership options.
2. **Connecting.** Having youth getting together with youth from other churches allows young people the opportunity to connect with youth from other schools and areas with which they might not otherwise connect. Although it's important for youth to have an intergenerational experience for spiritual growth, connecting with peers is also a way to build a sense of community in an important area of one's life.
3. **Working together.** An identified value of joint youth groups is the fact that congregations are working together and not in opposition to one another. When churches have gotten together for the purpose of joint youth groups, other joint ventures have spawned off of this activity. Most pastors involved felt it was a good thing to be working with other area congregations.

Disadvantages

The apparent disadvantages that were identified of having joint youth groups with other churches are as follows:

1. **Communication.** We all know how difficult it is to get information to everyone in the congregation. This problem is only magnified when multiple congregations are involved. It can be difficult to make sure that everyone knows what is happening, especially when you want them to know on short notice.
2. **Scheduling.** When you involve youth together from a number of different school districts it can increase the problem of scheduling. It could be difficult to establish a set meeting time for regular events when there are potentially so many conflicting extracurricular activities.
3. **Spread thin.** There are cases where joint youth groups have a paid staff person. In those cases, it can be difficult for the worker to feel truly plugged into any one congregation when there is an expectation to be present on a regular basis or at least have a significant connection in all the congregations. These youth workers have felt like perpetual visitors in all the congregations involved. It is difficult for these youth workers to have an active presence in each congregation.

Best Practices

If congregations do decide to partner together in forming a joint youth group, here are some “best practices” that would appear to make the experience more positive for all involved.

1. **Point person.** Even though a number of churches may be involved, someone needs to be in charge of the group and serve as the go-to person. Whether it be a paid staff position or volunteer, someone needs to be identified as the person who is pulling it all together. With someone designated as the leader, communication patterns are more predictable and easier to maintain.
2. **Church adult representation.** Each church involved in the joint venture should have someone or a couple designated as the one who is the adult sponsor representing their church. Having an adult from each church present helps the young people feel as if they at least know someone who is there and make attending a group where they may not initially know anyone feel at least a bit safer.
3. **Financial accountability.** Each congregation involved should contribute equally to the financial implications of such a venture to ensure buy-in by all parties involved and not make any one congregation feel like they are carrying a heavier load.
4. **Natural affiliation.** It appears that joint youth groups work best when the congregations involved have natural affiliations. In two locations where I encountered the existence of joint youth groups, the three churches involved were all connected historically through one of the churches being the “mother” church and the other two churches being church plants. In another location, they were all located in the same county and had a Mennonite high school as a common identifiable rallying point. Each of these joint youth groups were composed entirely of Mennonite churches. I did not come across Mennonite churches doing joint youth group ventures with churches of other denominations. They may be cooperating with other denominational groups for specific projects, but not with a regular meeting “joint youth group.”
5. **Supportive pastors.** If the pastors of any of the congregations are not supportive, the joint youth group may be sure to fail. The pastor often serves as a significant liaison for communication purposes and to help find supportive adults to represent the church in the group.
6. **“For such a time as this.”** Joint youth groups do not need to exist indefinitely. They may serve their best purpose during a period of time when the number of youth is low in congregational life. When the numbers increase, it may be a sign to go back to congregationally specific youth groups. Over time, joint youth groups may serve their purpose and run their course, and then it is time again for each congregation to organize their own youth group.

Other Thoughts

Some additional thoughts that went through my mind when I began and carried out this project are included below.

1. **“Sheep stealing.”** I expected to encounter a concern by pastors involved that the youth of their church may shift to other churches where their joint youth group friends were worshipping on Sunday mornings. This concern did not really exist, and in none of the situations where joint youth groups existed did there appear to be a case where the youth of one church started to attend another church in the group of churches represented. There may have been occasional instances where the youth of one church went to another church to be supportive of a friend’s baptism or other significant event, but it did not have lasting consequences.
2. **Missional impact.** A question that kept creeping into my mind throughout this project concerned the missional impact of a joint youth group. Is the missional nature of the church jeopardized when a church resolves to combining with other churches to form a youth group? Do the youth get the subtle message that we cannot grow in other ways? Is the net effect of forming joint youth groups a sense of growing inward even though it appears to be reaching out to and with other congregations?
3. **Integrative Youth Ministry.** The youth group is not the only setting where youth ministry happens in congregational life. The advantage of a small church is the ability to include young people in leadership and involvement in ways they may not otherwise experience in larger congregations. Although the youth group is a great setting for young people to be encouraged and form relationships with their peers, just as important is the relationship they form with adults and younger children in congregational life. Young people may feel more connected in this way than they would be by forming relationships with their peers where the activities happen in an age-specific group.

Conclusion

Although there were some concerns expressed surrounding each joint youth group situation, each one expressed positive feelings regarding the venture and were glad they were participating. There are likely many more advantages, and perhaps disadvantages as well, than I have mentioned, but these are the ones that appeared to come to the forefront in the midst of my conversations. The recommendations for “best practices” that I have given are there to guide current and future groups as they continue in and explore the possibilities. You will need to determine for yourself the merit of some of my own thoughts that I raise at the end of this report. Ultimately, the goal of each congregation should be to build up the kingdom by sharing the gospel with its young people and others in their sphere of influence. Each congregation will need to discern for themselves whether pooling resources for youth ministry with other congregations through the avenue of a joint youth group is the best method for them to fulfill their calling in their context.