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# Equip.

## Youth: How to Stop the Drop(ping out)

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# The State of Faith in Australian Youth: Haemorrhaging, Exodus or Exile

For more than four decades, international and Australian research has indicated that the church is becoming increasingly ineffective in its primary task of passing on faith to the next generation. The current circumstance has become so dire that an estimated 70% of previously active young people will dissociate themselves from the church as they move into their late teens and early adulthood. The evidence for this apparent exodus seems clear, but what are we to make of their departure? Are we as a church raising a generation destined to haemorrhage faith or are we reinforcing an approach to church life and ministry that forces youthful faith into exile?

## A (Brief) History of Youth Ministry

If you have kept an eye on the literature relating to youth ministry over the years you may have noticed some patterns emerging. Youth ministry developed through the 60s and 70s as a burgeoning discipline, drawing from and contextualising broadly accepted ministry insights to adolescence - particularly those pertaining to discipleship. Within a decade youth ministry had become a discipline (and profession) in its own right, however these early years were marked by formulaic resources - pre-packaged dramas, games, bible studies and object lessons to make your youth meetings sparkle.

Through the 80s, however, youth ministry became *strategic*. Perhaps following in the footsteps of church growth theory, the literature emphasised youth ministries becoming purposefully designed and structured through the application of insights gained from business management and organisational dynamics (though rarely explicitly stating the origin of such theory).

This strategic perspective continued well into the 90s with mega-churches writing books about how they also managed mega-youth ministries at the same time as an emphasis on discipleship began to be replaced by an emphasis on leadership development. Yet the 90s also witnessed a countering argument in the form of *relational* youth ministry. Relational youth ministry emphasised the interpersonal dynamic in youth work. Sociologically, it observed that young people's connection with a church's ministry was radically influenced by the presence of primary relationships rather than slick programs. Furthermore, theologically and philosophically it argued the centrality of relationships to ministry and lamented the way relationships become abused when they are utilised for some strategic end.

Into the 'naughties' (2000 onwards) and youth ministry literature witnessed an upsurge in the application of the social sciences. This took at least three forms. The first was to more formally furnish the church with resources to undertake community based youth work with vulnerable populations. The second was to apply the insights of developmental psychology and sociology to understand the unique life stage of adolescence such that youth ministry can respond intelligently to the dynamics of identity formation, peer clustering and differentiating from family systems (for example). The third application, to which the remainder of this article will devote itself, was a broader approach that sought to self-critically consider the effectiveness of youth ministry using insights gained from qualitative, quantitative and longitudinal research projects.

It would be a mistake to consider the above (overly simplistic) review of youth ministry literature to set out a series of stages or phases which have come and gone in youth ministry. Rather one is far better served considering these various influences as tributaries - streams that have their origin



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in one era, but all flowing into the river that we now swim in called 'contemporary youth ministry'. Thus, every youth ministry variously emphasises each of the above perspectives in much the same way as a visit to the Youth Ministry section at your local Christian book retailer will often yield titles that provide resources to run your next youth night, structure your overall ministry with strategic intent, equip leaders to respond relationally to young people increasingly informed by the realities of their psycho-social development.

## The Haemorrhaging of Youth

When we turn to consider the observations made by research employing qualitative, quantitative and longitudinal methods we are able to engage in the important though often uncomfortable task of self-critical reflection. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this kind of reflection now that formalised youth ministry is moving into its 50th year and bares all the hallmarks of a maturing discipline and vocation. Youth ministry theory, theology and practice is now quite diverse and there are a number of competing paradigms at work in the field - paradigms that can now be scrutinised for their faithfulness *and* effectiveness in the task of nurturing faith in young people.

It is therefore very disconcerting to observe a growing body of research that highlights a staggering degree of faith rejection taking place in young people who were once active in their faith or indeed raised in the church. Irrespective of denomination, socio-economic or cultural background, late teens and 'twentysomethings' in the industrialised west are leaving the church in droves and walking away from their Christian faith.

American research across the last decade or so identifies that between 40% and 84% of

those once active in faith during their teen years are now 'spiritually disengaged' in their twenties. The wide variation depends in part, on the research methodology used, as well as how being 'previously active' and now 'disengaged' (spiritually) was defined. One of the key cross-sectional studies in this regard was initiated by the Barna Research Group and published in the book 'You Lost Me' (Kinnaman and Hawkins, 2011). After interviewing with more than 22,103 adults and 2,124 teenagers from across the United States, this study found that around two thirds of its sample were no longer active in their church involvement and had failed to carry their faith into early adulthood.

Following Barna's publication, a Canadian collective of youth focused ministry organisations sought to verify if the same phenomenon was taking place in their country. They embarked on a major research project that sought an answer to two fundamental questions

1. To what degree do young adults in Canada today stick with or drop their (Protestant or Catholic) faith? And
2. What keeps them in the faith, and what helps to usher them out?

The results of their research are emblazoned in the title of the report - 'Haemorrhaging Faith' (<http://tgcfcanada.org/haemorrhagingfaith/>).

A number of colleagues who work in Canada recalled the collective shudder that accompanied the release of this report that concluded that Canada's experience was worse than the US's. Seven out of 10 young people were found to be disengaging from church, a figure which worsened to nine out of 10 for Catholic and Mainline denominations. Furthermore, this report added two new important observations. Firstly, it identified the process of active disengagement was not just happening in the post high-school years but was also significantly present in the younger teen years. Secondly, the data confirmed that this movement away from active church engagement is not just a stage-of-life phenomenon. That is to say, this is not just about young adults needing to test things out for a while, but then eventually coming back when they are married with kids. Instead, the report found that less than 5% return in subsequent years and in some denominations the figure drops to less than 1%.

## Is Australian Youth Ministry Also Haemorrhaging Faith?

Australia recently had the opportunity to consider the Haemorrhaging Faith research through a series of conferences in capital cities (see video recordings of the Melbourne conference at <http://haemorrhagingfaith.org.au>). The conferences sponsored a conversation between those who played an active role initiating the Haemorrhaging Faith research and a number of Australian researchers and practitioners who considered the research findings in the light of our context. My role in the Melbourne conference in particular was to consider whether Australian churches were also Haemorrhaging young people in much the same way as Canadian research would suggest.

My conclusion is that **Australian research is indeed telling a similar story** – though there is still much discussion to be had concerning the interpretation and implications of this story.

First, let us examine some of the data.

One of the first research efforts investigating 'dissociation' from the church by young people took place as early as the 1970s. With similar refrains to the Canadian research, the report "Hear today, gone tomorrow?" (Bodycomb, 1976) was the product of a collective of denominations coordinated by the Joint Advisory Council of South Australia. The report found that marked declines in church involvement commenced from the age of 19 onwards, and that these declines were, in many cases, the result of a largely subconscious drift rather than a conscious decision.

A decade later, Peter Kaldor heralded the next warning using data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS, 1987). A decade later and the NCLS again highlighted the fact that late teens and twenties were found to be increasingly underrepresented in the demographic profile of the church (reported subsequently again in Bellamy and Kaldor, 2002). Importantly, the NCLS also sought an answer to the suggestion that this underrepresentation was simply an indication of life-stage factors whereby young people exercising their newfound autonomy were leaving the church only to return later once they were married and with children. The report found that this interpretation was erroneous. Investigating four decades of data, the report found progressive increases in

the decline of young people over successive decades and concludes:

Forty years later, there is a large gap between the age profile of the Australian community and church attenders. It was the young who first started to leave the churches in the 1960s and 1970s – and they have not returned... They defected in large numbers from the churches, and most did not return... Now, younger generations are absent from the churches **in greater numbers...** Many churches missed that moment, and have never caught up (Powell and Jacka, NCLS Occasional Paper #10, 2008).

In 2005 the largest study of youth and spirituality our national has witnessed was commenced. It produced two books offering a depiction of the nature of spiritual engagement and expression in young people, though did not specifically seek to measure disengagement or dissociation. This trend however was quite apparent to the researchers, who commented in passing:

[our research] reveals quite dramatic losses of young members from [various] churches ... while the large increases in 'No-Religious Identification' leaves little doubt about the main destination of this exodus. (Mason et al. 2007. See also Hughes, 2007)

More recently, Hughes has identified that, of young Australians who had been identified with a Christian denomination in the 2001 Census, 500,000 decided to describe themselves as having 'no religion' in the 2011 Census. In other words, every year 50,000 young people are drifting away from the Christian faith. For many of these young people, ticking the 'no religion' box was the first time they had filled out a census form, having now become independent of their family (Hughes, 2013). Hughes has also been able to offer an overall percentage figure of young people's disengagement using data from the International Social Survey Program. This data suggests that 72% of Australians aged 15-29 dissociate from church life – a figure reminiscent of the Haemorrhaging faith report (Hughes, 2015).

Finally, David Goodwin's research shifted the spotlight from the latter teen years to the young teen years, observing that Australia is not just witnessing a departure of young adults from the church, but is also witnessing a major exodus in the transition from childhood to youth (Goodwin, 2013).

Thus, it would appear that a warning relating to young people and the church has been

resounding within Australia for some four decades now. At the level of dissociation, disengagement or disaffiliation, Australia seems to indeed be mirroring closely the Canadian experience and reflecting the U.S. experience. Yet many questions remain relating to the interpretation of this data and possible implications for ministry. To these matters we now turn.

## The State of Faith in Australian Youth: Haemorrhaging, Exodus or Exile?

What are we to make of these startling statistics? How are we to respond? First of all, I would underscore that whatever you make of these statistics, they are of great concern. The reality is that the Australian church is not just failing to 'reach' the next generation, it is failing to 'keep' the current one.

Secondly, however, is the question of how to interpret this data because the metaphors we bring to this circumstance radically affects our personal and ministerial response. For example, Barna's research speaks of an 'exodus' from the churches, while the Canadian research suggests that young people are 'Haemorrhaging *Faith*' – that is to say they are not just ceasing attendance but rejecting Christian faith. Certainly the data seems clear that in Australia we are witnessing large numbers of young people disengaging and dissociating from the church – as such we are clearly witnessing an exodus. But the question of what is occurring in the faith of young people seems far less clear.

Sociologically speaking, 'disengagement' and 'dissociation' refer to a change being made in one's affiliations, bonds and attachments within organisational and social contexts. As such, the methodologies of many of the above mentioned research efforts rightly describe the observed move of young people to cease their affiliation with a faith community as dissociation. However, the question of whether young people are at the same time, or in the same way actively rejecting their Christian faith is quite different. Such a process is more closely approximated by the sociological notion of **de/disidentification** – something that is not well supported by such methodologies and far better approximated by the metaphor of **exile**.

The metaphor of exile speaks of the disorientation of being formed within a social-context (like church) that no longer holds sway and no longer makes sense (in the context of

broader culture). It speaks of the confusion of a suspended identity caught between the past where it was affirmed and the future where it will be ambiguous (at best). It speaks of the disillusionment of meaning and belonging lost where there was once certainty and security. Exilic faith is loaded with doubt, jaded by questions and pock-marked by heresy. Yet at a deep and profound level, it can maintain its identity as Christian just as the exilic Jews maintained their identity as a son or daughter of Abraham in the context of Babylon.

As I have listened to, accompanied and researched the spiritual lives of young people, it is my growing contention that many of our young people who dissociate from church are not initially rejecting Christian faith (though many eventually do) but rather are exhibiting what I call an 'exilic' form of faith. It is the faith borne of disorientation in a world that has become rather more complex than a simple, inherited or socialised faith could handle. It is a faith that can still believe in a God who is borne of mystery, who can handle our laments and remain present to our wandering soul, in contrast to a church that may appear to be borne of politics, unable to tolerate our questions and too caught up in attractional forms of ministry to be present wherever they are.

## Nurturing Exilic Faith or Faith in Exile?

The essential challenge for the church, therefore is to discover the practices that nurture faith in the context of exile. If we do not, we may wind up nurturing a faith that forces many young people into exile with only a tiny remnant returning. For many decades now, the literature relating to faith development theory has highlighted that the kind of faith exhibited during periods of transition and change (what I am referring to as 'exilic faith') is vastly different to the kind of faith expressed during periods of consolidation and 'normality'. Transitional faith (akin to Fowler's 'individuating-reflective' stage, Westerhoff's 'searching-critical' faith, or Oser & Gmünder's 'ego-autonomy' stage) struggles in institutional settings because it is seeking to internalise and individuate a personal response of faith beyond that which is asserted by the faith community. The consistent lament of faith development literature was – and is – the observation that churches commonly fail to recognise and authenticate transitional expressions of faith and as such they go largely unaccompanied in the life and ministry of the church.

I live in hope that the church will heed the warnings that have emerged over the last 40 years. From the tingling concern raised by small scale research efforts of the 70s to the resounding gong of recent large-scale national projects, it is quite clear that young people's spiritual journeys are being made with feet pointed towards the door. Personally, I see no necessary reason for this exodus. I see no necessary reason why young people cannot find within the church the resources they need to develop faith amidst complexity. No reason, that is apart from the inability of faith communities to recognise the reality of transitional faith in their young people and so fail to facilitate it within the life and ministry of the church.

Our young people need safe places in which to doubt and explore the profound questions of faith. They need reassuring contexts to rail against the mystery of God and the depravity of our world. They need presence and belonging in the midst of their prodigal wandering. In the absence of these young people with their doubts, questions and concerns dissociate and disengage. They are left with no choice but to go into exile where over time most will de/identify. With the clarion call of more than four decades of research resounding in our ears, it is time we made a change.

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