COUNTING SHEEP:

NOT CONFUSING THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN YOUTH MINISTRY

by

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In many congregations, the difficult and ever-changing work of organizing, developing, resourcing and leading ministry for, with, by, and to youth (from middle school to high school) is in a moment of Crisis. The Exemplary Youth Ministry resulting in the work: The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry has described for the Church concern over the way in which youth express their faith.\(^1\) The regular decline in mainline denominations echoes the decline in youth and young adults in Church and religious life in recent decades, and the long-belabored concern over youth who don’t return to church after they have been confirmed, entered high school or chosen church as the option to dismiss among a choice of many. These trends, in chorus with a view of ministry, and particularly youth ministry, that holds itself as intentionally non-measured, presents a recipe for failure in disciple-making as the Church looks to pass on the faith to generations. A misunderstanding of God’s gracious forgiveness for us and how it is that God’s law is a gift to us seems to be in the middle of this circumstance.

The implications for such a problem are significant and troublesome for a denominational tradition that proclaims God’s Word as not only the Gospel, but as the good and gracious gift of the Law as well. Youth Ministry often wisely speak of the importance of relationships in the midst such ministry. Years ago, congregations and ministries that saw the rise of corporate-style churches and ministries differentiated their

\(^1\) Roland Martinson, Wes Black and John Roberto, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations toward Exemplary Youth Ministry (St. Paul: EYM Publishing, 2010),
own brand of ministry by steering away from economic models measuring warm bodies and mission trip registrations by highlighting the importance of less-numerical qualities: i.e. relationships. As a result, congregations have developed, measured, implemented and lived-out their youth ministries (like many other congregational ministries) with keen eyes toward the immeasurable strengths of the church, church leadership, ministry and discipleship. This focus on relationships, community, faith, and the like have proven to be a good thing for congregational ministry and for the life of the church in our time. These features are a strong witness to the otherliness that the Church holds on to so dearly in spite of a world where everything can seem to be about the bottom line, the dotted “i’s” and the properly accounted-for chickens. Our prevailing culture often falls into the trap of measuring things in a bigger is always better sort of way, and has influenced many churches, denominations, and ministries to join them in a quest for efficiency, solvency, growth, and even a faith-bent type of profit. Those ministries and organizations of the Church that have resisted such a change do so with the firm foundation on Christ and faith in Him, as opposed to faith in progress, development, or staying in the black. This effort of the these ministries is to be lauded so that the Church may continue to hold our witness that speaks outside of the marketplace. The argument being made is not for congregations and ministry organizations to become accountants, nor is it arguing that efficient and well-run organization is what the Church proclaims or believes in as the Good News. Instead, we ought also to look to the gifts of management, budgets, accounting, and structure: gifts from God given for us to employ, to promote, care for, and support the youth ministries of the church in the way they preserve order and permit ministry to flourish.
Theoretical:

Much work has been done on the benefit of having a well managed and measured organization in the non-church community. Both not-for-profit and profit-making businesses and organizations have ample literature and study on the importance of well-managed resources, carefully calculated balance-sheets, and code-abiding structure. We can assume that the development of seeing value in the counting of things happened around the same time of the development of counting them, or approximately around the beginning of understanding numbers is general: that two things were more than one thing, etc. Putting names to numbers and counting things happened before 30,000 B.C.E.² So much has been published in this realm, and so long is its history that it would be comical to try to find a primary source on why carefully managed organization and structure is good for profit-making or non-profit organizations. Government agencies, organizations of various types, families, etc. all generally agree that good and disciplined organization permits them furthering the mission they each carry out. Churches and church-thought-leaders have also generally recognized the importance of a good church administrator for the overall safety, health, and vibrancy of their congregation.

However, when it comes to youth ministry in particular, even more than children’s ministry or any other ministry in many congregations, the reluctance to promote, encourage and employ administrative structure in its midst is still highly tolerated. In his book, Sustainable Youth Ministry, Mark Devries conveys what many

² Rundman, Peter Strom. How Mathematics Happened: The First 50,000 Years. (Prometheus Books 2007). p. 64
years of experience in ministry with youth and with other youth ministers have led him to conclude: “Few principles are more sacred in youth ministry than this tired refrain, ‘It’s not about numbers.’” Why such a refrain has held on particularly in youth ministry is something worth exploring. There are many cause which one might deduce from such an outcome but below are a few that emerge.

A Final Pre-Adulthood Push: Perhaps it is a last ditch effort to teach children there are more important things than numbers before they are off on their own. Such an observation may point out that the Bible has many things to say about how it is that Christians are to be in the world and not be judgmental or shallow or consumeristic, etc. As adults in the congregation have likely experienced for themselves, the push for numeric worth in adulthood (if it has not already begun in adolescence) is unstopping. A congregation may cheer on the chant of not-being about numbers because they may argue that youth in their midst still have a chance to live life free of the burdens of accounting and economics and striving, and so on.

Youth Minister’s / Director’s Disdain for Measuring: Because paid youth ministry types tend to be young adults themselves, many who have great skills and passion for Church leadership with youth do not have the same skills for organizational management or administrative leadership. Such persons may even scoff at the notion that the job description should include goal setting, planning, dollars per youth, etc.

Excuse-Making: It has become lore that youth in high school, sometime after confirmation, tend to leave the church (many times with their parents leading the way), or at least come so intermittently that they make occasional appearances in worship, but

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rarely in youth group functions. Given this trend, the cry for youth ministry not being about numbers may be a self-justification for the ministry being unable to keep youth around. With this idea, those who shout No to numbers may do so with the sneaky suspicion that if it were about numbers the ministry would be quickly exposed as not matching up. If general trends and assumptions in youth involvement in ministry have been setting the bar so low, perhaps, from this view, the bar is better off removed so as not to make a painful discovery of just how low the numbers have become.

Tradition: Because the above positions (and unknown others) have been held regularly in the church, the “it’s not about numbers” pledge has become ingrained in our ecclesial culture so much so that countering it might as well be countering Christ, the Gospel, and the existence of all that is, was, and will ever be. The expectation for youth ministry leaders, youth ministries, church councils, pastoral staff, and some youth themselves to fall in line with this “No-Numbers” march has been set for so long, that one might assume Jesus would have rather not have the people he fed, healed, or taught be recorded as “large crowds”, or “thousands.”

Humility: Finally, and somewhat oddly, the “It’s not about the numbers” cheer is also promoted by those ministries and or congregations who have very large numbers of youth involved and active. Perhaps those chanting from this location do so to appear in solidarity with smaller churches, seem less arrogant, or perhaps it is to defend themselves with a “we’re actually doing ministry too, it's not just a big mob every Sunday and Wednesday.
Devries describes the general sentiment, that numbers are unspiritual, in opposition to faithful ministry. Fortunately, new research has been done to understand if numbers are indeed in opposition to faithful ministry or instead that has been an excuse by misinformed, misguided, or lazy youth ministry and/or congregational leadership. Devries quotes several sources including Youth Ministry that Transforms, as well as work by Jim Burns and Mike Devries and concludes what youth, their parents, and likely the rest of the church has known for some time: “Youth go where the numbers are” and are “drawn into places where they don’t feel uncomfortably alone.”

Devries goes on to provide further guidance from his experience with youth ministry in congregations and he suggests how it is that congregations might play the numbers game without becoming a humanless algorithm. He proposes that congregations should “determine how many students are part of [their] ministry.” He likens such tracking to the parable of the Lost Sheep in which the Shepherd knows how many sheep ought to be present in the fold and what would happen if there were some who were missing or lost. Along these same lines, Devries recognizes that the work of determining how many students are part of its fold is hard work. Nevertheless, it is critical to make plans, join in ministry, and be faithful to the call to be in ministry with, for, and by young people.

Aside from hospitality to young people who might feel more in the right place among many peers, the issue if numbers is critical to the adults who are on staff or who volunteer with the youth. “Overcapacity youth ministries result in short-term youth

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5 Ibid, 25.
7 Ibid, 27.
directors and programs that quickly launch and then sputter out of existence. It can in the same way, be expected to be “mired in a climate of criticism, blaming, and burnout.”

Theological:

First, a short parable illustrating the theological and christological trouble with numbers in the church based loosely around Matthew 18: 21-22,(NRSV):

Pat, a youth director at First Christian Church and Jesus were walking on the road as Pat was Jesus’ disciples and found it critical to spend time learning from him, discerning how it was that Jesus wanted Pat to live and be and do ministry in the world. Pat viewed Jesus as a teacher, someone from whom he could learn how to best be a disciple, how to best be in relationship with Him and how to do ministry for the sake of the world. After an afternoon of traveling, listening, teaching, and learning, Pat got the nerve to approach Jesus with a question. Pat had been thinking about youth ministry and how it should be that youth ministers and youth ministry leaders could be acceptable to God. Pat knew that clearing this matter up with Jesus would open of the ministry of the church, giving new meaning to Pat’s own work and the work of the church. Pat trusted that with the answer Jesus would provide, Pat could finally meet the expectation and meet the requirement, knowing that whoever might judge Pat’s leadership in the ministry, whether it be parents, church elders, other youth ministry leaders, Pat’s own conscious, or even God, would see that Pat knew and could meet the requirement.

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8 Devries. Sustainable, 36.
So Pat approached Jesus imagining that there would be much work to do, or possibly, perhaps anticipating that Jesus would give a youth ministry requirement which Pat had been exceeding for some time. Pat felt comfortable in the ministry being done and believed the ministry to be above, if not far above average by all reasonable measures. So, Pat approached Jesus with a question. “Lord,” Pat said, “if we have a youth group in my congregation, what percentage of the youth in the congregation should be actively involved? Should it be 70%, Jesus?” Pat knew that 70% was a number that far exceeded any reasonable expectation. The congregation at Pat’s church had responded very well to many of Pat’s new ideas and administrative acumen and the ministry which Pat led included about 75% of the youth in the congregation. Pat knew Jesus would be impressed, or at the very least tell Pat go for 85%, a number Pat could strive for and likely achieve with a little effort. Pat was looking for a number that, when reached (if it hasn’t already been) would justify Pat’s work, effort, the existence of his career, his passions, and his very life.

Pat stopped in the road as the question rang in the air for a moment before Jesus turned around. “Not 70%, Pat, but, I tell you 770%. Pat stopped walking while the others picked up the conversation and continued on with Jesus. “What on Earth was Jesus expecting? 70% is a incredible number by any estimation.” Pat thought he might hear 80%, a respectable (and doable) challenge for the next couple years, he thought Jesus might even say 110% percent. That would be a good, you-can-do-it, kind of response, but Pat didn’t hear a you-can-do-it response from Jesus. Pat heard what would by all accounts be an impossibility. 770% percent of the youth in Pat’s congregation would be almost every kid in town. Doesn’t Jesus know what is possible, what a law-of-averages
approach might look like in this circumstance. And so Pat went back home confused and rather despairing over the ridiculous requirement Jesus made.

And so, we have the problem with youth ministry (and often ministry in general) and numbers. The problem with youth ministry and numbers is that, like church-work in many circumstances, there seems to be no end in to be satisfied except for “perfect”, “all”, and “every.” It is not only the problem that youth ministry has with numbers, it is the place numbers, measurement, even structure and order have in the life of our Church. That problem is the church’s difficulty with recognizing God’s Law as good and as a gift to the church. In the same way, the Church must recognize that God’s law and the manner in which God freely forgives sin and imputes justification by grace through faith on account of Christ, are two very different things and we are wise to not mix-them up. This is regularly difficult for church-leaders to do.

Many church-types, especially Lutherans in my experience, hold strong and fast to the idea of being the church of “grace”. Phrases like, “I lead by grace,” or “we all about grace here,” or “we live by grace,” are all great and good ways of understanding God’s pure gift that is our justification by grace through faith on account of Christ. This gracious-God understanding is likely the intention of such expressions. It is often a way to relay that “This church,” (or any other ministry) “doesn’t set up cold, calculating, impersonal numbers-based ministry. Instead, we are all about relationships, (or freedom, or flexibility, etc).”

Young adults in particular, who are, because of their close age proximity, excitement, and passion, often put into roles with youth and young adults, seem to insist
on creating ministry environments that are flexible and forgiving, based not on the measures of the world (i.e., income, popularity, or profit) but on higher things (people, love, lilies-of-the-field type matters). Many emerge from college, or other places in life where the last thing they want to do is be told to track attendance, set seemingly constrictive and measurable goals, or be asked to meet budgetary guidelines set up by people in suits in a boardroom.

In many regards, they are heeding Jesus when speaks regularly about the dangers of calculated models of discipleship and ministry. Jesus seems to asks his disciples to not get attached to plans before they go out and be His disciples.

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers,* cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food.

Matthew 10:7-10

Jesus is clearly asking that the disciples rely on his providence and words and not consume themselves with organizing themselves to death or getting caught up in a paralysis of analysis. While the church makes a bold claim and statement when we act on
faith and not base it on our own understanding, we might also be burdened by such leadership style.

Understanding leadership and participation in youth ministry through this sort of “the-Lord-will-provide” manner might end up with boredom from a disorganized trip to the beach, lack of participation in the non-fund-raised ski trip. However, it could also end up in far worse outcomes, hypothermia from an ill-prepared canoe trip, a costly and lengthy insurance and legal scandal from poorly background-checked volunteers. The possible consequences from an ill-prepared and disorganized youth ministry can not only result in luke-warm ministry, but could have catastrophic consequences for the Church and the ministry of God through it. We must look at how it is that we understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel and almost as importantly, how we keep them in their own arenas and not try to mix one with the other.

Congregations, when at their best, often understand the Gospel as that proclaimed Word of justification by grace through faith on account of Christ. This is based on

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\text{For by grace you have been saved through faith,}
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\text{and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not}
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\text{the result of works, so that no one may boast.}
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\textit{Ephesians 2:8-9}

Such a proclamation is the Word that the Christian Church distinguishes itself from the rest of the world and as the Church testifies, raises the dead to new life in Christ. Churches also do a fine job of understanding the Law and its uses, to preserve life and
give order in this world, and to judge so harshly that one’s hope might be found in Christ alone. The Church regularly confesses these, God’s “two words” clearly and faithfully.

However, the Church also gets into sticky situations when the two become mixed-up or confused. For example, when the law sneaks into the Word of Gospel, the Gospel turns into God’s word of gracious forgiveness, with a little help from a personal confession, one’s reason, or a priest. In this confusion, the Gospel turns into the Law-Light, or a Love-based-Law, etc. This takes away from the Gospel’s pure declaration of freedom, forgiveness, new life, and justification.

When the Gospel gets dropped into the word of the Law (which is relevant to our discussion) then the Gospel is no longer the Gospel, and it attempts to make the Law easier to swallow, less strict, or more loosey-goosey. The recognition between the differences between leadership and participation is a helpful illustration in this regard:

Jeff, a song-leader at WoodLake Mountain Lutheran Camp by the Beach has just begun training with Christy, the song-leader who has been at the camp for several summers, and they are working on songs for the summer, and how it is that each of them will take leadership. Jeff and Christy are both excellent musicians and both are passionate about song in worship and daily life around camp. They each also know many old and new favorites and share the ones they know independently with each other. The philosophy of the camp around music and singing is that the Psalms tell us to Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord! The joke around camp with other counselors, the director, and the song-leaders is that the Psalm doesn’t say to make a perfect, or “on pitch” noise to the Lord, just a joyful one.
As Jeff and Christy anticipate their first week with campers, Christy sets time aside to rehearse with the cabin leader and youth who will sing what, how many verses of “Sanctuary” they want to sing, and whether or not someone will lead hand-motions while Christy and Jeff lead, and play guitar. Christy asked Jeff if he would come to that short rehearsing and planning meeting, but Jeff opted out of the meeting. As the worship and singing began, Christy and Jeff played opening songs together, and taking Christy’s lead, Jeff felt really in-sync with the group and with the music. He was indeed making a joyful noise. Christy led the next song with the cabin and the rest of the campers began to sing around verse 2 as it was the second night at camp and they were beginning to learn the song. The cabin presented a short skit and followed by a few camp songs. Christy and Jeff agreed that Jeff would lead with the cabin these last songs by himself to get experience. As he did, he noticed that the group had a different rhythm than he knew and he was the only one singing the descant while the others looked at him wondering when the verse started. He had seen Sanctuary sung in the past with the third time being acapella. So he finished the second verse and bowed his head letting the group lead in the acapella verse. No one sang. The other guitarists looked to him to see what was next and stopped mid-song out of confusion.

At camp, the freeing word was that campers and staff didn’t have to be perfect singers. However, the song leaders were the ones who had the strong responsibility, and sometimes burden, to provide the law: To give order to the evening, to lead the singers so that they could follow easily and to plan well so that the worship being done could flow smoothly.
In the same way, the law of Gospel to churches is that God is not demanding a certain number of youth to be active or participating. Young people can miss youth group and be forgiven from having miss, skipped, or otherwise not showing up. On the other hand, ministers in all parts of the church, but especially in youth ministry, have the authority, burden and responsibility to order things boldly, well, and with courage, trusting that it is not their plans that will save them (or the youth) but that such order gives the Gospel and ministry room to make the joyful noise.

Practical:

As indicated, youth ministry in our church is in a critical time of identity-making. Youth ministry in our time needs a new understanding of how it is that we might announce and be faithful to God’s gracious forgiving Word for us through Christ Jesus, and how it is that he might understand our role in the world, with its economic, legal, and psychological scheme. Doing so, we can understand, appreciate, and celebrate what place numbers, organizational structure, and administration has for us in how we do the ministry we do. The first step in this process will be to set up a plan. Unlike a plan from the YMCA, boy scouts, or high school football team, this plan will still need to begin with careful prayer, discernment, and patience. Although we now know to appreciate gift of structure, we will throw out Christ with the bathwater, instead we understand that our Christian ministry call us to the careful, deliberative, prayerful, and daring work of being the Church, and particularly being the church with, for, and by young people.
The plan will include setting up a mission statement. While this has been done in previous ways, we will now do so with the strong eye toward what we desire for our congregation’s youth ministry in numerical form (as well as in character, spiritual, and developmental forms). In Sustainable Youth Ministry, Devries provides several guidelines from his wealth of experience as to how we might go about setting bold and faithful goals for a youth ministry. He recommends having one full-time staff per 50 youth. Although many congregations believe they have neither the funds nor the number of youth to be able to have a full-time youth person, the importance of making this position a priority is imperative. Without such paid, accountable and trained leadership, the congregation is setting other “staff and volunteers to be unable to fulfill expectations” (Devries, 36). In the same manner, we will develop a plan for adult involvement in the programs, events, and relationship of the youth ministry of the congregation. The importance for young people to have faithful adults (and even safe adults of any type) is increasingly clear. We will plan on having formal ‘Guides’ in our youth ministry who have expressed interest in working with young people and in whom the leadership already in place sees gifts.

For the safety of the children, youth, volunteers, the reputation of the congregation, and for the protection of the Word of God in Christ, those persons seeking and welcome to be volunteers in the youth ministry will be required to have a background check and will be expected to have at least 2 years of experience in the congregation. Devries points out that although it may seem counter-intuitive, “more adults [volunteers] do not require fewer paid staff” but has the opposite effect. (Devries, 36). Congregations that read such remarks may respond with, “Well, we’ll just have to have fewer
volunteers.” Such remarks miss the general point of having youth in the community, and perhaps the point of ministry at large.

Instead, congregations that understand the work of the leadership with and by youth in their youth ministry understand how it is that numbers and organization and structure matter. They matter not only in the same way that they matter to any organization made of people, but they matter to the Church as the Church claims God’s good gift of the Law in a way that distinguishes it clearly from the Gospel which saves, and justifies, but still holds on to it strongly so as to provide space for the Gospel to be proclaimed to the end of the Earth.


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