

YOUTH MINISTRY DOESN'T EXIST

(WHICH IS WHY WE NEED IT ALL THE MORE)

BY ANDREW ROOT

I'm waiting for the Jerry Maguire moment.

You remember the Oscar-award-winning movie from the '90s about the sports agent, played by Tom Cruise, who has the awakening that his profession is doing harm, that things have gotten out of control to such an extent that agents no longer serve the purposes of their clients. This awakening leads him to call the whole profession into question and to leave a successful firm to start all over.

Every semester, I keep waiting for one of my MA or MDiv youth ministry students to do the same, to have their Jerry Maguire moment, to state loudly and passionately that they have come to the realization that youth ministry is hurting more than it is helping. That this profession called youth worker, youth pastor or youth director has gotten out of control and stopped serving young people (or worse, the ministry of God in the world).

I fear this every semester, imagining what I'll say, wondering if I need to defend this thing called youth ministry. I've given students plenty of chances to have this Jerry Maguire moment. I repeatedly say rhetorically edgy things like, "Youth ministry doesn't exist; it is not a biblical or theological concept. Rather, youth ministry is simply ministry, ministry human person to human person in search of God. Youth ministry only exists because of a cultural reality. It is a response to a societally/culturally created cohort."

After the initial shock of hearing that their graduate degrees will be in something that doesn't really exist, most students actually agree. They recognize that youth ministry is a response to a cultural reality. They nod when I say that if there were no high school or no MTV, there would be no youth ministry. But still, no Jerry Maguire moments!

Hurting How?

It may be overstating things to argue that youth ministry is doing harm. I actually don't believe this. I think youth ministry, despite being often overlooked, may be doing more than any other form of ministry to actually change the church.

But there is a problem that few of us have been willing to wrestle enough with, a problem for which youth ministry (and the church) is culpable—at least in part—in creating and, for sure, perpetuating. As more and more convincing theories come out of the social

sciences, it becomes clear that marks of guilt have stained the hands of youth ministry. The problem is that youth ministry may be unwittingly participating in hurting young people.

And hurting how? Youth ministry might be hurting young people by giving credence and power to the made-up category of "adolescence" by giving legitimacy to the perpetuation of the made-up life stage of teenage-hood.

New and extensive studies by psychologists like Robert Epstein (*Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*) and Joseph and Claudia Allen (*Escaping The Endless Adolescence*), coupled with established arguments by historians like Joseph Kett (*Rights of Passage*), Harvey Graff (*Conflicting Paths*) and the more popular cultural critic Thomas Hine (*The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*), have all argued quite convincingly that adolescence is an unnecessary cultural category.

When you think about it, most cultural categories are made up in one form or another. But this made-up category called adolescence, we've been told, is based in biology, in the natural unfolding of the human organism. It transcends just the cultural or societal. Just as no one can escape being an infant, so no one can escape being a teenager, being stressfully caught between being no longer a child and not yet an adult.

Yet, this is the problem. It just so happens that this thing called adolescence isn't a necessity, as we've been often told. Historians have shown that it didn't exist pre-industrialization. There were only children and adults, and you were often considered an adult simply when you looked like an adult, when you could do the work of an adult. No one cared about age—some people didn't even know their age. What mattered was your ability to take responsibility and function like an adult. At least in pre-industrial agrarian America, there was no magical passage that made you an adult, other than the ability to get your hands dirty and do work alongside fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts.

But this time between, this period of being in adolescence, is filled with stress and storm; it's filled with hormonal overload, right? It just so happens, so say the new studies done by psychologists, that this isn't necessarily true either. It was G. Stanley Hall, a

psychologist, who both popularized the developmental distinction called adolescence and based it in a state of stress and storm produced by a hormonal overload that literally makes the people caught in the middle of it temporarily nuts, forcing them into a psychic break, for just a few years, just for their teenage years.

Watching the craziness of young people's behavior in burgeoning cities in the last decade of the 19th century and drawing from a soon-to-be debunked evolution theory called ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (see Epstein chapter five in *Teen 2.0* for a discussion of this theory), Hall argued that adolescence was a developmentally unavoidable stage. He stated that everyone had to pass through this time and go crazy for a few years. Hall did not recognize that his theory was based in a time of great societal change and that, just decades earlier, this so-called stage had neither existed nor seemed necessary.

So, even though Margaret Mead and others doubted Hall's thesis from the start, it appeared that urban/suburbanization and expansive (in size and reach) high schools gave the social credence (that Hall mistook for biological) to his theory. In other words, young people seemed to be acting crazy, seemed to be hormonally overloaded, giving legitimacy to Hall's thesis. Young people then became self-fulfilling prophecies; they were told they were crazy and horny, so they acted that way. But the problem of adolescent behavior may have been the unnecessary category of adolescence itself.

And unnecessary is now what psychologists are saying. Epstein and the Allens, among others, have actually shown that adolescence is not only unnecessary but is actually harming young people. They convincingly show that things like depression, suicide, delinquency and early pregnancy may have an overarching source in the unnecessary frustration of artificially being held back from being what their bodies and minds desire, from what others their own age, in decades past, would have had access to—the responsibilities of being an adult.

But, wait, what about their minds? Haven't studies shown that the teenage brain is primitive and wholly underdeveloped compared to the adult brain? The Allens point out that many of these popular assertions have overstated the difference between adult and teenage brains.¹ There is still much we don't know. Plus, as brain science continues to develop, it is being

shown that the brain is actually a social organ that literally changes as we interact with our environment, and changes rapidly.² For instance, they have seen change in the surface of people's brains who simply learn to juggle. So it shouldn't surprise us that the teenage brain looks a certain way. The question is, has the brain made adolescence? Or has an unnecessary, culturally created category called adolescence made the brain? It appears it's the latter.

The Guilt of the Church

The church isn't off the hook here. Our youth rooms, youth camps, youth services, youth directors and youth outreaches all show that we have been more than willing to prop up this made-up cultural category called adolescence. The church is not only guilty for helping legitimate this cultural category but also for helping create it in the first place. You could say that the church is to blame.

After all, as historians like Phillip Aries argue, there wasn't even a real concept of childhood in medieval Europe.³ It was Luther and the Protestant church that provided a new understanding of children as a gift of God and seeing your Christian vocation (your very service to God) as parenting them in love. From this theological assertion and ecclesial action the concept of the child (of childhood itself) transformed children from medieval, poor-sighted animals, to being seen, post-enlightenment, as innocent angels. Adolescence would become a parasite, feeding off the stage of childhood, which the church made possible.

But, Kett explains, it wasn't just childhood that the church helped create that makes it guilty but also the cultural entrenching of adolescence through church programs, clubs and events to evangelize them.⁴ Seeing young people as crazed adolescents provided fodder for evangelistic mission (and eventually paid mission leaders) to go and save adolescents from themselves, through participation in church-based teenage holding pens and behavioral rehabilitators called youth groups, modeled after the age-specific educational system.

So is it possible that youth ministry has been something created to address a make-believe reality? (Now, just because it is make believe doesn't mean it isn't powerful, especially when society constructs structures—like schools and niche marketing—to fortify the make-believe category. This makes youth ministry important.)

Youth Ministry Moving Forward

Youth ministry itself has started to wonder in the last handful of years why all of our best efforts haven't necessarily worked; why, even with our best efforts, young people see little importance for the church other than to be nice and happy (see Dean, *Almost Christian*). But is our problem that we simply haven't found the right program, teaching method or talented youth worker? Or could it be that our problem is adolescence itself?

Might the problem be that the Christian faith is to be lived in the responsibility of discipleship that looks, at least in part, something like adulthood? And if young people are held out of adulthood even in their churches, then how can they possibly be disciples (who seek God by taking responsibility for neighbor and world), committing the whole of their lives to the action of God? After all, committing the whole of anything is something adults do!

Epstein and others have called society to end the madness, to end this unnecessary category called adolescence. In his 500-plus-page book (*Teen 2.0*), Epstein makes a strong case for ending teenagehood, and he even suggests steps that can be taken. Yet, while being convinced by Epstein's diagnosis, it is difficult to be hopeful for his perspective—not because it isn't right or rich; simply because it feels impossible. Changing bureaucratic school systems, legal systems and marketing strategies seems like more than an uphill battle. It feels like a death march.

But maybe this is where the church can act. If the church is partly responsible for creating adolescence, then maybe part of our job in the next several decades is to help destroy it. Unlike almost every other institution or cultural collective, the local congregation, if it had the will, could tomorrow take steps to see and include young people after puberty as adults in their communities. After all, in some traditions, we confirm young people sometime soon after puberty and then tell them after completion that they are now full (adult) members of the congregation. But, of course, this is just a *wink, wink*, for after confirmation we stick them in the holding pen of the youth room.

But what might happen if we included them as adults, expected them to act and participate as adults? If our local congregations began (even if it was only on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings) treating young

people as adults, it might have huge ramifications on the rest of society. It just might be that when Epstein and others call for the ending of adolescence, they've missed maybe the most powerful force in bringing this desire to fruition—religious communities.

.....

So does this mean that youth ministry is unneeded? That we should cut the budget by cutting loose the youth worker? I actually think it means the opposite. If the objective is to welcome and treat young people as adults and do this as a countercultural action, then we will need such people to advocate for the full participation of this people. We will need someone to continue to remind the congregation to see these young people not as crazed adolescents, as society continues to impose, but as young, responsible adults.⁵ And, of course, especially as the congregation functions counterculturally, these young people will fail, falling into traps of adolescence (especially as the rest of society treats them as such). Therefore, it will be all the more important to have an advocate for the young. But at the end of the day, this advocate youth worker's job is to have the theological depth and pastoral skill to invite young people to participate in faith as adults and for adults to see them as such.

So maybe the Jerry Maguire moment I'm looking for has nothing to do with ending youth ministry but, much like the movie itself did with sports agents, with re-working it, seeing youth ministry as working to end adolescence by invite young people to be adults in their communities of faith, to take responsibility for seeking God and loving their neighbors.

-
1. Allen, Joseph & Allen, Claudia Worrell. *Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), see chapter two.
 2. See Cozolino, Louis. *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). And Siegel, Daniel J. *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1999).
 3. Aries, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).
 4. Kett, Joseph F. *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), see chapter three.
 5. Which, by the way, may be how we deal with the emergent adult phenomenon. Maybe they're not in the church because we, like other institutions, refuse to see them as valuable, adult members of the congregation.

Andrew Root, PhD, is associate professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, MN). He's the author of *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* and *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*. For much more on the issues of young people and divorce, see this book.