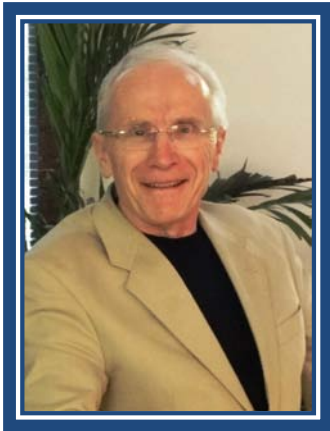


Roland Martinson

on

What Really Works in Youth Ministry

By John M. Mulder



One of the agonizing and puzzling dilemmas confronting congregations is how to retain the affiliation of young people. For example, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, approximately 90 percent of fourteen-year-olds are active in the church. By the age of twenty one, an estimated 35 percent are involved. This pattern holds true across denominations and traditions. It appears in churches as diverse as the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. One theory posits the possibility that these young people are likely to return in young adulthood, especially after they marry and have children. That does not seem to be happening. The “religious” youth in their early teens have eventually become part of the unchurched adult population in America.

These trends have placed a renewed focus on youth ministry and its efforts to maintain and deepen church affiliation and Christian identity. For decades, what has been perhaps the dominant model of youth ministry is “the Pied Piper,” an attractive, out-going individual with a contagious personality, who is able to win the allegiance of young people and keep them involved in the church. However, new studies indicate that “the Pied Piper” model is not only wrong but actually works against effective youth ministry over long periods of time.

One of these studies, funded by Lilly Endowment, was conducted by Roland D. Martinson of Luther Theological Seminary and Southern Baptist Wesley Black (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) and Roman Catholic John Roberto of Lifelong Faith Associates. It studied seven diverse denominations and sought to identify congregations that actually had effective youth ministries. The focus of this shifted from identifying the problems in youth ministry to an “asset-based” approach in which strengths and “best practices” became the heart of the research.

The results have been communicated through meetings, consultations, and conferences, as well as articles and an important book for pastors and congregations, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), available from EYM Publishing, 2481 W. Como Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108. The book is an extremely important resource for pastors and lay leaders, for it not only surveys what works in youth ministry but also describes models of youth ministry for various kinds of congregations — small, medium, and large; urban, suburban, and rural.

Dr. Martinson brought to the study his four-decade experience in youth ministry, both as a practitioner and a researcher/teacher. He is a graduate of Concordia College, Luther Theological Seminary, and San Francisco Theological Seminary where he earned his S.T.D. He has taught pastoral theology and pastoral care at Luther-Northwestern and Luther Seminary for more than twenty-five years and is now Vice President for Academic Affairs and Academic Dean at Luther Seminary. He is also the Carrie Olson Baalson Professor of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry. Among his several works in pastoral care is *Effective Youth Ministry: A Congregational Approach* (Augsburg, 1988).

In the following interview, Dr. Martinson discusses why “the Pied Piper” model of youth ministry doesn’t work and what actually does work in youth ministry. The implications of the study are compelling for pastors, congregations, and those engaged directly in youth ministry. They confound much of the prevailing misconceptions of what youth ministry is and point the way forward to what it could and should be.

Q: *You have been involved with youth ministry for forty years, both as a practitioner and a researcher and instructor. How did you get involved in youth ministry and why?*

Martinson: I had early inclinations toward youth ministry, but what really awakened my interest was my first call as an associate pastor in southern California in the late 1960s. I began with a group of seventh graders in a confirmation Bible study who had doubts about how long I would last as their pastor and teacher. Two and a half sessions into that course, I took off my coat and stopped what we were doing. I said, “Let’s talk,” and we had this sort of “come to Jesus” moment of what I was doing and their sense that being there didn’t matter to them. So we talked about what would matter. We laid out the deepest, existential questions of humanity in their sixties teenage language, such as: How do I be me? How do I live in this life that I have? How do I live in my own skin? How do I belong? How do I be a friend? How do I hold up my end of the stick? What matters anyway? What does a future for me look like? How do I deal

with everything that is coming at me — all the demands and stress in my life?
How do I deal with the unknown in all of its forms?

We simply changed course, and I took up a life with them. I remember the night that group graduated from high school, five years later. We got together about 2:00 in the morning. There was a group of 75 or 80 young people and adults who had been with them. We had been in each other’s lives, and we had made a huge difference to each other. Christ had shifted the egocentric nature of the first questions to a sense of mission in God’s world.

I saw the huge changes that the church — as a faith community and as a learning community — could make in the lives of young people. I was hooked.

Q: *People who get involved in youth ministry often burn out after about five years, but you have stuck with it. How do you explain that?*

Martinson: I think the reason people burn out is the mistake in understanding that the model for youth ministry is a Pied Pier — the outgoing, upfront, rah-rah person who leads exciting experiences one after another. That model of youth ministry not only burns people out, but it also is highly ineffective in terms of its impact across time.

I started with the Pied Piper model because that is what I was offered. I soon learned that by keeping an eye out for leaders within the congregation — both adult leaders and the youth leaders themselves — and equipping them for leadership, we could expand the influence of what we were doing with young people. Rather than one person shouldering the responsibility for all this, we soon had three or four. By the time I left that church in southern California, we had a team of over 60 people at work throughout the congregation.

I also learned that the primary influencers in the lives of young people are parents, and the secondary influencers are their friends. Out of this came the concept of youth and family ministry. We became convinced that as we shaped and formed parents’ faith and practices in their homes, it would make a decisive difference in the lives of youth.

For example, we did a research project in which we learned that if a young person had been involved in four or more mission trips during their years as a youth in a congregation, they were two times as likely to be in church at age 25. If they had been involved in four or more mission trip experiences with their parents, they were four times as likely to be involved in a worshipping community. So, the next thing we did was develop the capacities of families who really didn’t know how to work with kids around questions of faith.

The final thing I learned early on was that if youth ministry was going to be sustainable, it must be congregational. In the early 80s, that led to a book, *Effective Youth Ministry: A Congregational Approach*. With the help of many others, that work has continued. But the congregational focus has stayed with me and helped shape the book, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*.

This process of awareness helped me understand that I wasn't at the center of youth ministry as a leader. Others could join me. In fact, congregations were at the center of youth ministry, and families were at the center as well. That expansion of leadership, accompanied by a curiosity that led to research with others, kept me from burning out. It has made me excited about what was going on in youth ministry and convinced me that we had to work at this if we were going to evangelize the next generation.

Q: *Would it be safe to say that this kind of journey you have outlined is really a story of decentralizing authority and leadership?*

Martinson: I think that's a great way to put it. What it means is that the authorization and responsibility for youth ministry — as well as its strength and power — get spread out. It resides in the giftedness and charisms of people who love youth and have the capacity to work with them in a congregation. Then it spreads out and resides in the lives of young people themselves. They begin to own the idea of Christ claiming them and their discipleship and their mission. Then it spreads further into the full authority and enfranchisement of the congregation itself.

Q: *Turning to your most recent research that produced *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, what were the most important assumptions that guided your study?*

Martinson: I would say there were two genres of assumptions. The first one involved the type of research we did. We moved from a problem-based research model to an asset approach. We assumed that if we looked at those congregations which had been profoundly influential in the lives of young people, we could do appreciative inquiry and learn about the best practices in youth ministry and the theological understandings at the heart of those best practices. We also assumed that those best practices and that theology would be transferable to other congregations. So, there was a basic shift from a problematic discourse to an asset-based discourse.

The second set of assumptions involved family ministry itself. First of all, we assumed that theology was important. Youth ministry was so often focused on

technique: “Let’s get the latest set of ideas!” We had a sense that as in ministry with adults, one’s understanding of God and what God is doing in the world through the church makes a huge difference. Big theological commitments matter. As we started this work, we thought we might find something that would help us understand why theology was or could be important. A second assumption was that intergenerational ministry was crucial or just as important as ministry with youth alone. We wanted to test whether intergenerational involvement might be critical in the long-term effectiveness of youth ministry. The third assumption was that youth ministry was basically the challenge of making Christians, making disciples, rather than simply occupying the time of young people. We assumed that young people would only be showing up if it matters, and if didn’t matter, it wouldn’t matter. Those were our three research assumptions about the nature of youth ministry.

Q: *Did any of your assumptions prove wrong?*

Martinson: I don’t think any of them were proved wrong. But we learned some things along the way that were surprises.

One surprise was that effective youth ministry was never due to one factor but several factors — a both/and. Sometimes the various factors were contradictory and paradoxical. We tried to capture that in the title of our book, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. The “spirit” interacts with “the culture” to produce effective youth ministry. At the heart of this was theology, but it was a particular theology that has expansive connotations. That was a surprise.

For example, I remember a conversation between a Roman Catholic lay leader and a Pentecostal Assemblies of God pastor at a conference. They talked about their experience with young people, and while they had differing ways in which their theologies worked out, their central theology was essentially the same. God is present and active. God is the subject of sentences. The verbs that describe God are present tense, and they are active. The active life of God is in fact taking place through the life of a congregation, in the life of individuals, in the community, and through the congregation in the community.

Here were these two very different people, who practiced the faith in very different ways with differing ecclesiologies, and yet they shared the same basic commitments. They had the same deep theological sense and ideas about who God is. Thus, we talk about “the spirit” of youth ministry.

The second surprise was the importance of both age level youth ministry and intergenerational youth ministry. It is essential that youth ministry be focused on the youth themselves, especially the existential journey of young people. But we

also found that intergenerational youth ministry, embedded in the congregation itself, was also needed. It wasn't just one or the other; it was both.

Some of the nuances also surprised us. For example, in one congregation we found fascinating musical groups for youth and other groups for adults. But the same congregation had equally as many intergenerational music ministries, and these two fed each other. The young people and adults in the integrated music ministries were in fact recruiting young people who in turn organized their own unique music ministries and then strengthened the intergenerational groups.

That's the notion of culture.

Q: *Were there any other surprises?*

Martinson: Yes. Here are a couple of others. We did in-depth, ethnographic studies of 21 congregations. They ranged from very small to medium size to huge, rural to suburban to urban. The largest congregation was St. Mary's Catholic Church in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, with something like 20,000 people. But across the board in these 21 congregations, there was — without failing — a point person that the congregation recognized as a champion of youth ministry. In three-fourths of those congregations, that person was not paid. Surprise! But that person existed, that person was called, that person was enfranchised, that person was authorized to be doing what they were doing. They were recognized and supported by the community.

You can now start seeing the recognition that this is not Pied Piper work. This is a whole network and a whole culture at work. On the other hand, it also suggests that leadership is absolutely critical.

Q: *And it's unpaid.*

Martinson: In 75 percent of the cases unpaid. So that's one surprise.

The second surprise involved the assumption that in order to have a strong youth ministry, you have to have at least a mid-size to large congregation. Absolutely not. In the 21 congregations we visited and the 131 congregations we surveyed, some had no more than 75 people in them. And so, the ideas, the models, the assets, the matrixes of youth ministry in our book are applicable to a small rural congregation, a small inner city congregation, or a mission congregation in the suburbs, just as much as they are to a huge congregation in Pompton Lakes.

Q: *That leads to another question: Regardless of size, what would you advise a congregation to do in order to build an effective youth ministry?*

Martinson: It starts with the pastor. The first thing I would do is educate the pastor to the fact that at the heart of youth ministry is the theology of the congregation. We intended that our book could be placed in the hands of pastors. It would help them understand that the call to youth ministry is not lock ins and sleeping on cement floors. Pastors' call to youth ministry is to understand how God is at work in the first third of life and how ministry in the first third of life is deeply theological. It's about making disciples, and it's deeply ecclesiological. It's about how a congregation understands itself and works across the generations. So, the first thing is to educate the prime theologian, the prime word and sacrament leader in the congregation, to the theological nature of youth ministry. It involves a new vision of how God is at work in the first third of life.

Second, the pastor would identify and recruit a person within the congregation who would be a champion of youth ministry. Their task would not be how many events they could put on but to fashion a new lens, a new sense of what youth ministry is. There is now a lot of literature on the theological turn in youth ministry that has broadened and deepened our awareness. This champion of youth ministry then joins the pastor in working with the congregation to rethink its way of how to value youth and get into a relationship with them. The second thing that champion would do is start building relationships with at least one, two, or three adults who have a spark of faith and a sense of commitment to the congregation as a place for young people.

On the basis of that beginning, they then start building on the assets of the congregation at the age level of youth. They would also build youth ministry with parents and intergenerationally within the congregation. Our book has in it several suggestions as to how those people could actually pick up that work.

Q: *In some respects, this asset-based research flies in the face of a whole generation or more of analysis that goes in the direction of “what’s wrong with congregation life and how to fix it.” Instead, it’s asking what’s right with congregational life and trying to strengthen it.*

Martinson: Exactly.

Q: *Did you find people resistant to that? Did they say, “That’s not going to solve my problem?”*

Martinson: Yes. Right after we finished our work and began presenting it at meetings and conferences, we emphasized the asset-building approach to youth ministry. But the mood or atmosphere around youth ministry in so many congregations is so dire that people were stuck in their hopelessness. So, moving them to the point of saying, "it's possible," was a challenge. We started by having them identify one of their strengths as a congregation and then imagining how that strength could become the impulse center for ministry with young people. When they tried it and we stayed with them, it was contagious. One small success regularly led to another.

The critical piece we discovered is that you couldn't do this by having even a team of people come to a conference. They needed coaching because you don't quickly roll back two or even three generations of Pied Piper models of youth ministry. People inevitably evaluate what was happening in youth ministry on the basis of how many came out to a youth event tonight. We realized that we had to stay with them. So, what we are doing at Luther Seminary now is forming a cadre of people who coach congregations, and it's that coaching process that has resulted in the transformation.

Q: *Let me go back to the theology that you see as being critical to this task. Can you say more about the theological issues and questions that you saw emerging as primary in launching an effective youth ministry?*

Martinson: I think they focus on several longstanding areas of theological inquiry.

First, every major renewal of the church has taken place primarily around the question of who is God and how does this God move about in the world. If you look at renewals of the church, you see this moment where people discover that something of the essence of God has been lost. What we discovered in these congregations is a variety of ways of recognizing that ministry comes out of the living, active presence of a gracious God. This God moves out from that God-self into a beloved world that God has created. This God is not afraid to enter deeply into the brokenness of that beloved world, and God does so with a kind of enthusiastic involvement that isn't afraid to go where the brokenness is. God takes up residence in connecting with that real life.

Many congregations talk about a God who once did those things, or they talk about our ministry, rather than God's ministry. They want to sanitize the discussion and aren't willing to expect transformation. They don't talk about God in the present tense or pray in such a way that prayer becomes an integral part of the actual operation of the congregation. They don't explore questions with God without having the answers. That makes it difficult to forge a deep understanding

of this God showing up in the most surprising and unexpected places. That kind of deep, incarnational presence, Holy Spirit, opens up a sense of a God who is gracious, a God who loves the world, a God who is ahead of us in the world.

Second is a sense of ecclesiology that is deeply grounded in baptism and the sacraments. Even in the nonsacramental church there is a sense that God has called all generations into community and that community takes on flesh and blood in real relationships. If those relationships are going to be real, they don't get siloed and segmented. They take place. People struggle to find connections and be in each other's lives and care about each other. They take on the sense of the body of Christ in the New Testament.

Third is the question: what does a Christian look like? Does following Christ result in a move from an egocentric to a Christocentric life? And does a Christocentric life call a person to come and die? Youth have crap detectors 85,000 miles long, and they can see adults sticking to and staying in an egocentric kind of existence, in which they find protection for themselves, rather than giving themselves away for the sake of the gospel. The nature of discipleships and the nature of worship as an expression of discipleship are huge in understanding a new expression of what it means to be a maturing Christian.

Fourth, the final set of theological questions revolves around the notion of mission. Congregations with effective youth mission don't split the idea of mission or turn it into a conflict. They don't believe conservatives do evangelism and liberals do advocacy for justice. They are kind of Jim Wallis people. They tell the story of what happened to them in Jesus Christ. At the same time, they are out confronting the powers in terms of justice. I think of a Presbyterian Church in Billings, Montana, where the young people were, in fact, leading the evangelism, the acts of mercy, and the caring for justice in the community. They showed the fullness of the gospel.

Q: *What are the findings at the heart of your research?*

Martinson: There are two that are most important. First, youth ministry is essentially about following a living, present, active God in that God's life in mission in the world. That's the heart of it. If you stray away from that, you stray away from the vision, the focus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, and that's the spirit of youth ministry.

Second, if you do one thing to influence a kid in a relationship, that has power. But if you do seven things around a kid, that kid is immersed in a culture of relationships and ideas and influences. You have a profoundly more powerful capacity to impact and shape that young person's life. In the process, you have a

chance to resist the incredible encroachment of culture in the consciousness of young people.

Two other conclusions break out of those findings. One is that if youth ministry is going to matter, it has to matter at the very fundamental development of the life and faith of the young persons themselves.

Here’s the best way to say that. I met a 17-year-old in one of the congregations. She said, “You know, I’m in a really good family. I love my folks and my sisters; my older sister is really a model for me. I go to an excellent school. I have a couple of teacher that I enjoy, but none of them messes with my life like this place does.”

I said, “What do you mean, it messes with your life?”

She said, “Well, they see things in me that I don’t even know exist. They call out gifts and potential that I didn’t know exist. And they aren’t afraid to invite me into the fray. I get drawn into the work itself, and I am free to fail and succeed. I’m taken seriously. I make contributions.” She added, “Here’s a place where I discover as a teenager, I already have a capacity to make a difference in the real public world. This place messes with my life.”

The final thing to say, I think, is that youth ministry is an asset building task, done by teams of people across time. That makes it work, and the pastor is the key leader. I can’t emphasize that strongly enough. The pastor is the key leader.

Q: *The notion of the pastor as leader came as a surprise to me because I’m used to the Pied Piper model and because the Pied Piper model has a corollary, that is, you delegate youth ministry.*

Martinson: Right. Exactly.

Q: *I’ve seen relatively few congregations that would come anywhere close to what you are describing.*

Martinson: I think you’re right. But we went after them and found them, and we thought we could learn from them.

Q: *Did you go out looking for congregations that had these characteristics?*

Martinson: No, we worked backwards. We used a former set of criteria that had been developed to describe mature young people. Good research builds on previous research. We had seven major categories of a maturing Christian young person and some descriptors. We then used seven faith traditions and networks of people who would have contact with congregations. We sent out this information and asked, "Can you identify congregations that have over time developed maturing Christian young people?" So, in other words, we said, "Here's the product. Can you identify congregations that are producing people like this?"

We had nominations of about 500 congregations. We sent these congregations a note, saying in effect, you've been identified as a congregation that is doing this kind of ministry. Are you, in fact, a congregation like this? Surprise, 149 of them said, "We aren't. Whoever said this, they got us wrong." So then we had about 350 left, and we contacted them and said, "We would like to study you. Will you join us in a study?" 260 of them agreed. Then, in the hardest work I have ever done, we developed a huge survey with 180-190 questions. We got 6,000 pastors, primary youth leaders, youth counselors, parents, and young people in 131 congregations to complete these surveys. That is essentially the way we went about it.

Q: *I know you are continuing to disseminate the results of your research. But so far, what has proved to be the most valuable to congregations? What have they latched on to?*

Martinson: Now that I have moved to being academic dean and the work here is in the hands of others, they could answer this better than I. But from what I have learned and overheard, it would be these two pieces.

First, youth ministry can be done congregationally. The book, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, is full of ideas of how congregations have done that. These congregations have expanded the scope of youth ministry beyond young people's age level. That's been a major contribution.

Second, age-level youth ministry has to be combined with family ministry within the context of the congregation. Families need to be supported by congregations in practicing faith and good parenting with their kids. When they are guided and inspired by leaders, these congregations embody four powerful ideas:

- A great youth ministry identifies leaders and supports them.
- These leaders work one-on-one or in small groups with the youth themselves.
- The congregation opens itself to ministry across generations.

- The congregation supports families.

And there are tons of congregations that are doing those four things.

Q: *Let me ask you a question about the nature of “best practices” as a form of research. Does the model work as a research tool? Can you really identify “best practices” and analyze them?*

Martinson: Yes, with a caveat. I would actually describe them as “practices of a fruitful bias.” By clustering various practices, one ends up with some pointers and some clues about what is working.

Let me use an example. Service learning or mission trips — we found them everywhere. We not only found them everywhere, we found they were contextually custom designed. So I could go out today and bet my life on saying to a congregation: “If you can put a service learning opportunity in the life of your young people that is custom designed to their particular sensibilities and your theology, chances are you are going to have good results. So, there you can see the strength of looking at things that are working in a variety of settings. I would call it “appreciative inquiry,” and that’s the language I use in describing our work.

Q: *Step back for a moment and address this: when the day is done, what really is exemplary youth ministry?*

Martinson: First, it’s youth ministry that stays attuned to the life and mission of God in the world at each time and place.

Second, it’s ministry that stays attuned to the context — to the peculiar, particular, existential experience of young people. It’s ministry that taps into the vitality of the whole people of God as congregation in working with kids.

At the bottom of it all, the God we know is relational and moves out into the world. Youth ministry, no matter what form and shape it takes, is relational and moves out from the persons involved into engaging others. It’s relational and missional.

Q: *Given the contextual character of youth ministry, how does it look different in, say, a Lutheran congregation or an Assemblies of God congregation or a Roman Catholic congregation or a Southern Baptist congregation?*

Martinson: It doesn’t. It’s about understanding the radicality of the incarnation and opening oneself to the particular context and impulses of those

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young people’s lives. At the same time, how that gets handled, how that gets worked out has to be in keeping with the ambience and culture of that particular faith community.

It’s a combination of the incarnation as the way they embody Christ but also the way they embody Christ while deeply attuned to what’s going on with kids.

Effective youth ministry is about each community having an ear — a deep curiosity and love for the true experience of young people and an equally deep love of the gospel.