

Reclaiming the “Fellowship” Hall

“A global youth culture transcends the world,” Or so we’re told. The claims continue: “Adolescents in Beijing, Timbuktu, and Toronto have more in common with each other than they do with their respective parents.” Studies do show a common array of Nike-wear, Matrix regalia, and Estee Lauder products in the rooms of teenagers from East to West. But are teenagers everywhere really the same?

From the pierced and tattooed non-conformists to the home-schoolers; from the football players to the techies; from Starbucks study groups, to the mall rat packs, to the arcade addicts- we youth workers will be quick to challenge the idea that a common youth culture unites even our own students, much less 1.5 billion teenagers who populate the globe.

So how do we even begin to call our youth to a shared identity that unifies? And should we? From a purely pragmatic approach, the easiest ministry route is to establish a cool youth room...lots of retreats and trips...a hip name...and reminders that Jesus loves the little children, whether “red, brown, yellow, black or white”... and so the reasoning continues, “Let’s leave our uniqueness at the door”. But adolescents seem to reject that idea.

So maybe we should just let our students be individuals and do their own thing. But if this is the case, how on earth is the church, and for that matter, our youth group supposed be connected at all?

The challenge for the youth leader is to nurture unity with diversity, which can also be described as the fellowship of faith¹, one of the theological portraits of the Church painted by Paul. Paul continually calls the Church to see ourselves as equal, mutually bound together slaves of Christ and servants of one another.

Faith in and through Christ, is to overcome the boundaries that separate people, whether race, gender, or class. Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3.28).

When we’re “in Christ”, we’re all equal... but Paul also seems to show that we’re not the same! Men and women are equal... but they are still “men” and “women.” So what’s the unifying point? It’s in the fellowship of faith where each is “in Christ” which means that a follower’s identity is wrapped up in “Christ first.” If we see our identity as “Christ first,” we hold on to what we have in common and leave room to appreciate our differences. And this leads to more than fuzzy feelings. It propels us in our fellowship of faith to serve, rather than be served; to be comfortable with who God has made us rather than jockey for position to get attention, power, or credit. It changes our hearts to where we can cheer others’ successes without being cynical or competitive. And why? Because we see our identity as “Christ first,” where common bond is expressed in different ways through different lives.

¹ This article is the final piece in a four-part series on four theological images of the Church, as described by Robert Webber in *Ancient-Future Faith—the Body of Christ, People of God, New Creation, and Fellowship of Faith*.

For the record, this isn't easy. Who in their right mind, gives up safe, program-controlled, legalistic, pat-answer giving ministries to engage in the fray of saying that we see followers of Jesus as "Christ first" putting everything else up for grabs? Who in their right mind gives up successful, moneymaking retreats, because all the youth group resources are going to one type of teenager? Who in their right mind says, barring anything illegal or immoral, there are no limits on dress, music, or expression of self in our youth group... or for that matter our church?!

Do we really believe that we are one in Christ, where our identity starts with Christ first? Do we really believe that the church is only the church when there is true fellowship of faith between all types of students...including elders and deacons... including custodial staff and youth pastors... including 11-year-old boys, 87-year-old women and 43-year-old men? We hope so, but it's definitely the road less traveled. It's no easy task to have fellowship with male, female, slave, free, prep, metal head, Presbyterian, Baptist, old and young.

We believe the break through begins by seeing our fellow followers through a Christ first lens. As we subvert our differences, unity shines while the true uniqueness of people is freely expressed. We might ask, "What are the areas of inequity in my church?"; "Who holds the power?"; "Where do the tensions lie?". And before pointing the finger, might our own student ministries be called to lead our churches into living in light of the fellowship of faith we're declared to be?"

What would it look like if...

- We spent a Saturday helping the Children's Ministry decorate their rooms for their upcoming series simply because we wanted them to succeed.
- We asked the church for help with a youth project or program, and truly admitted that we needed other's perspectives and input?
- We went out of our way to encourage our music pastor or dare we say, our sr. pastor with no ulterior motives?
- We insisted that our missions trips be intergenerational even though they would be harder to organize?
- What if members of Christ's global church...including preps, garage band stars, Mongolian pastors, and Latino children...all found their greatest identity in being connected to the global fellowship of the faith—past, present, and future, because we saw in each other, Christ first?

Let's reform our churches from within. Instead of giving up on the other age groups and ministries, let's lead the way in living as a part of the fellowship of faith. And in so doing, may our student ministries influence our churches to be "As a choir able to sing in unison and [with] one voice." (Written to the Ephesian Church from Ignatius, bishop of Antioch—A.D. 110). May "Fellowship Hall" be more than a room, but a core symbol of our church.