ADOPTIVE
YOUTH
MINISTRY

Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith

edited by chap clark

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Acknowledgments

This book has been years—if not a lifetime—in the making. For me, as first a parachurch staff member singularly devoted to inviting teenagers into an authentic, vibrant faith in Jesus Christ, and then as a trainer and teacher for others who shared that same calling, *Adoptive Youth Ministry* represents a theological evolution for the church and also for me. I therefore have lots of people to thank.

First, to the visionary and impassioned staff and volunteers of Young Life. You taught me the root structure of what we now know as contemporary youth ministry, starting with the early years of Jim Rayburn and passing on what you learned as pioneers of ministry to adolescents: Bill Starr and Bob "Mitch" Mitchell, Jim Shelton, Cliff Anderson, Don and Patty Taylor, Randy Giusta, Shelley Sadler, and countless others. These lessons are alive and well in thousands of men and women who serve Christ on the front lines of ministry around the world.

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who make it possible for them to live into that reality in Christ.

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Chap Clark

Fuller Theological Seminary, in partnership with Baker Academic, has created a website dedicated to this book at youthministry.fuller.edu. This site will provide supplementary content for *Adoptive Youth Ministry* as well as video and print resources that assist the faithful in thinking carefully and creatively about youth ministry. Our desire is to create a community where we can learn from one another in applying the ideas and principles from *Adoptive Youth Ministry*. We look forward to learning from one another.

Contributors

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Introduction

Adoption—Reenvisioning Youth Ministry and the Family of God

CHAP CLARK

> We are the family of God,
> Yes, we are the family of God,
> And He's brought us together
> To be one in Him,
> That we might bring light to the world.
>
> —"We Are the Family of God,"
> John Byron, 1976

Of all the metaphors used to describe who we are as God's people in both the Old and New Testaments, in most contexts *family* is the least considered. We talk about being a "community," a "body," and a "gathering." We envision our relationships in the church to be a collection of networked people, which is usually practiced through the default program of "small groups." When we do sing songs that recognize we have come together to give praise to God (what many call the "worship" time), we sing as if our words are true. Yet when we run across lyrics that force us to consider what these words actually mean, some of us might chafe at the idea. Perhaps you have heard or sung, for example, Hezekiah Walker's "I Need You to Survive":

> I need you
> You need me
> We're all a part of God's body . . .
> You are important to me
> I need you to survive[1]

Pastors learn in seminary that the word we translate "church," *ekklēsia*, actually means "gathering" or "assembly."[2] Thus the local gathering of Christ's followers, then and now, is what Jesus called into being as his people. The church (local, historical, global) and the Church (those across time and culture and geography who are "called according to his purposes," Rom. 8:28) are those who gather "in [his] name" (John 14:13). This gathered group, who are the "sent" ones (John 20:21),

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are the collection of people that God has called together to be his "witnesses" (Acts 1:8) to the world of the Creator's goodness, mercy, and love. God's declaration of who we are, then, is embedded within this notion of "we-ness": "*We* are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3, italics added). Not only are we his gathered people but we also become siblings, even as we have "become children of God" (John 1:12). We, as God's people, are all God's children: welcomed, accepted, embraced, empowered, and united, with God as our Father (Matt. 6:9, "Our Father in heaven . . .").

Adoption as Ministry

A child who is accepted and taken in by non-biological parents as a permanent, actual, and "full" son or daughter is referred to as *adopted*. Merriam-Webster defines this as the "act of transferring parental rights and duties to someone other than the adopted person's biological parents. The practice is ancient and occurs in all cultures."[3] To be adopted is to be fully accepted as a member of the family, with all the rights and privileges of a natural-born child. Previously, God was not our Father, but in Christ we are now included in the family of God. This is a theological and ontological fact that is made plain throughout Scripture. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:19, "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." In Christ, we are not only called God's children, but we also are God's *adopted* children. While this is a powerful image for who we are in Christ, what little attention theologians give to this fact is limited to either human adoption in a family or a debate over our standing as God's children. I have been able to uncover very few voices who explore in depth

what this means for how we live together as "members of God's household."[4] Nonetheless, the fact remains that we, as God's adopted, are invited—indeed, called—to live out of this reality in community as we gather together as the family of God.

The metaphor of family provides the theological framework for how we are to live together as God's people. The ministry of adoption, then, invokes the following four foundational premises:

> #1: Adoption recognizes that in every church or organization there are insiders and outsiders.

The primary critique people have with the concept of adoption as a basis for all ministry is that it sounds paternalistic; they consider the idea as starting from the church as parent. The power of adoptive ministry is not that we are adopted by a group of "surrogate parents" (the older people in the church) but rather that ***the inner circle of the gathering does whatever it needs to do to make sure that the adopted person experiences the family of God as a fully embraced and included participant***. Adoptive ministry recognizes that in every group or gathering, church or organization, some people are dominant and many are not—and the many who are not often feel like they are on the outside of the community or group. Adoptive ministry mandates that it is the responsibility of those in power to draw in, to include, and to equip all those who feel like outsiders so that they feel included in the very center of the family of God.

> #2: I am adopted into God's family as a child with other children.

Because some are in power and many are on the systemic outside of power, adoption as the

primary metaphor for God's family requires that those in power see themselves as siblings to all others who trust in Christ (John 1:12). God is our Father, and we together are his children (Eph. 3:14–15). When Jesus told his disciples that they must "receive the kingdom of God like a little child" to "enter it" (Mark 10:15), he was reminding them of this central message: *you have one Father, and you are all siblings*. While this requirement is often reduced to the exhortation that adults should come to God with a "childlike faith," the text itself does not allow for that interpretation. "Like" is a simile, not a metaphor, and every sixth grader knows that a simile means what is compared is functionally equivalent. We not only are to have a faith that is "like a child," but we must also "receive the kingdom" like a child, which demands the whole person. Adoptive ministry begins with the creation of an environment in which there is an ethos of familial mutuality. The child, then, has something to bring to the adult; the teenager has something to bring to the senior; and vice versa. This is the essence of family.

> #3: Jesus has his eye especially on the vulnerable.

Adoptive ministry means that while all are siblings—all are children of the same Father, whether they are eighty or fifteen years old—those who are mature must take the lead on ensuring that those who are vulnerable *for any reason* are protected. Thus adoptive ministry is not simply a grounding theological framework for youth ministry, though it obviously applies to both youth and children's ministry. *Adopting the vulnerable means that those who are mature must see it as their responsibility to ensure that those who are not are cared for, included, and empowered, and can grow into well-established life and faith.*

Therefore, adoptive ministry includes all those who may be or feel vulnerable, such as the elderly, the single parent, the divorced, the outcast, the hurting, the lonely, the lost, and the broken. God has already received and identified outsiders as his children and adopted them into the kingdom. What they need, and therefore what those in leadership must initiate and sustain, is the experiential reality of what God has declared to be true.

> #4: Adoption is not limited to the gathered but includes the outsider as well.

With its roots in the historical body of Christ, adoptive ministry begins with the local community of faith and extends to the global people of God. Adoption means all those who are called God's children are taken seriously, welcomed as part of the family as siblings. As God's people gather, worship, and are equipped for ministry both to God's people and to the world God loves, the theological calling of partnering in God's work of adopting children into his family becomes the primary external expression of life together. Evangelism is not about shouting a message to the world, whether on a T-shirt or through a flashy musical production hosted by a church. Biblical evangelism is about living together as witnesses to Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit in the world God created—"You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8)—and living as salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16) amid those God has come "to seek and save" (Luke 19:10). Justice and acts of mercy cannot be separated from verbal proclamation of witness to Christ; these are all part of our calling as witness, salt, and light. *Adoptive ministry is vital because we are witnessing to the fact that in Christ God has invited those who "believed in his name" to "become children of God" (John 1:12). This*

is the message of the good news. Therefore our message—in our lifestyle, service, and word—is adoption.

These four principles form the basis of *Adoptive Youth Ministry*. The conviction driving every chapter in this book is that all youth ministry practice is an expression of this theological mandate. Those in power—that is, the mature and the leadership—have the responsibility to ensure that every child, every adolescent, every young adult, and every other vulnerable outsider is brought into the center of the family as a participant in the community. This does not mean that there is not the place and even need for leadership (both lay and paid staff) to take on the role of initiator and ultimate decision maker of a given organization or community. What it does mean is that those who are vulnerable must be included and invited to participate even while they are being nurtured, trained, and empowered to grow into a peer level of engagement with the mature. This is the role of youth ministry in the twenty-first century. *Adoptive Youth Ministry* is designed to equip you to be the voice of adoption and to be the catalyst for this dual task of nurturing and empowering participation.

Why "Adoption"?

Several years ago, in a doctor of ministry cohort class in youth, family, and culture, a student beginning the second year shared how her congregation had received the teaching she had absorbed during year one. A senior pastor, she came home from class excited and motivated to lead her congregation into a greater awareness of what it means to live together as God's family. In response to the training she had received, Rev. (now) Dr. Andrea King delivered an impassioned sermon proclaiming the need to "assimilate" children and youth into the church family. Her congregation's immediate and visceral negative reaction stunned her, until she realized what she had tapped into (prompted by her professor, yours truly).[5] In using the term *assimilation* to describe the church's call to welcome and integrate the young into the life and participation of the faith community, she had used a word that, in her primarily African American community, had been forced on them by a dominant ethnic culture that would gladly welcome someone, so long as he or she adapted to the lifestyle, culture, and rhetoric of the dominant community. In other words, as Andrea shared with the class, *assimilation* to her congregation means that I "*get* to join you, so long as I *become* you!" Andrea discovered that this meaning of *assimilation* misses what God intends for his family.

In response, we spent the next two days wrestling with an appropriate way of thinking about dealing with the twofold call of youth ministry, especially in a world where kids have been isolated by adult-controlled systems. The discussion led us to examine how the apostle Paul describes the coming together of two very different and oppositional communities: those who grew up in the Jewish tradition and received Jesus as the Messiah as the culmination of their faith, and those who were outsiders—gentiles (non-Jewish) who came to faith in Jesus Christ without the history and experience of Jewish practices. Paul settles this throughout his writings by appealing to the unity that is in Christ (e.g., Gal. 3:26–29, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"). He uses the term *adoption* four times to describe the familial privilege both Jewish and

gentile Christians have with God and one another in Christ.[6]

As we examined Paul's use of this term, we came to see that what youth ministry leaders and influencers had been leaning into for years (if not decades) but had yet to put together into a straightforward framework with clear language came together in the term *adoption*. Certainly youth ministry is interested in younger generations owning their faith; the goal of youth ministry is often described as faithful lifelong discipleship. Likewise, there is general agreement that the church is the place where God calls his people to experience, embody, and express their faith—and somehow parents fit into the mix. What remained unclear was how to put together these three convictions. Reclaiming the biblical metaphor of family for the community of faith through adoption seemed to be a clear and unifying concept that was biblically based and theologically grounding. Although some may wrestle with the way people think about adoption across cultures and in various contexts (especially the possibility of it being hierarchical and paternalistic, since it is more about what God has done than about what we do, and therefore all ministry—including evangelism and justice—is envisioned as participating in God's work), I believe that adoption is an appropriate way to conceptualize youth ministry practice.

In the recent book *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, I detail the rationale for youth ministry—and *all* ministry—as the ministry of adoption.

> In terms of youth ministry, where for years the young were not only seen as a separate population but have been programmatically structured to maintain and even reinforce that separation, the only way the church can begin to realize its calling to live as a family is by literally adopting the young. *This is the theological and sociological rationale for Youth Ministry as Adoption.* Youth ministry is, by definition, ministry to and for teenagers, typically middle and high school students aged eleven to eighteen, and sometimes includes college ministries. As a group, this population rarely experiences their relationship with the dominant population of church, or society at large, as being something to which they belong. If the church is indeed intended to be a network of familial relationships, a "family of families," then the need for a comprehensive ministry strategy to make this happen trumps all other programmatic goals. If people do not know one another, if they do not feel cared for or necessary, and if they do not sense that the rest of the community values them, the church is simply not the church. The church must adjust vision and structure to ensure that everyone in God's family experiences their faith as a vital member of God's household as expressed in the local faith community.[7]

The Purpose of *Adoptive Youth Ministry*

Since what has been called "modern youth ministry" emerged on the ecclesial landscape in the mid-twentieth century,[8] every decade or so a book has been published that gathers together the current (and assumed future) array of philosophies, perspectives, and practices that make up what most agree is "youth ministry" in order to ground and shape the practices and scope of the movement. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, a trend to more specialized youth ministry books and texts became the standard way of thinking about and doing youth ministry. Many dozens of

important, compelling, and ministry-altering youth ministry books have been published over the past few decades, with many making a significant if not widespread impact on youth ministry. Yet even as publishing in youth ministry increases, conferences abound, and more authors and speakers experience wider circulation and audiences (to say nothing of Twitter and blog followers and Facebook "friends"), few foundational youth ministry books containing multiple authors and perspectives or multiple, across-the-board ministry topics (like Mark Senter and Warren S. Benson's *Complete Book of Youth Ministry*) have emerged that can help youth ministry students and practitioners sort through the plethora of viewpoints and frameworks.[9] The most recent of the multitopic foundational books is *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* (edited by Kenda Creasy Dean, Dave Rahn, and myself). One of the more direct outcomes of *Starting Right*—a collaborative project of Zondervan Academic and Youth Specialties, authored by well-known and respected youth ministry leaders from a wide swath of the youth ministry landscape—was the way it set the groundwork for what would soon become the theological framework for many in the field, both in the United States and internationally. Since its publication, practical theologians from a variety of theological traditions have produced a diverse, rich, and helpful way of thinking about and doing youth ministry. Today it is common to attend a youth ministry conference and participate in a seminar, if not several, on the "theology" of youth ministry, which is almost always framed within the rubric of practical theology.

Because so much has changed over the past two decades in both the culture at large and the diversity of youth ministry perspectives, there is once again the need for a single volume that will help to ground and shape the way we think about and do youth ministry. *Adoptive Youth Ministry* brings together diverse and well-respected scholars and teachers, practitioners and researchers, and speakers and writers who come at the field of youth ministry from many angles and yet are drawn together by the idea that the church is the vital center of all youth ministry practice.

Three Issues Facing Contemporary Youth Ministry

Even as the greater focus on practical theology in recent years has provided the theological framework for ministry and most youth workers have been more theologically deliberate in their ministry thinking and efforts, three related but distinct issues have emerged. While they have come from different people and directions and for different reasons, none of the three seems to have been the catalyst for the other two, yet all three now make up the bulk of our collective discourse. Each of these issues impacts the other two, but up to this point little has been done to pull them together. In no particular order, the three issues are:

- The struggle related to youth ministry's long-term effectiveness, in that we are "losing" kids once they leave our ministry programs
- The concern that people in contemporary culture, including an increasing number of young people, report to have written off "traditional" faith (a movement labeled the rise of the "Nones"). Current literature seems to confirm that many young people do not even want to give youth ministry a chance, and there

is ample evidence that great numbers of adolescents and emerging adults have a negative view of the church and confirm wanting nothing to do with "us," meaning the institutional church.

- The widespread recognition that as the world has changed dramatically over the past few years and decades, these changes not only affect how we do ministry but also who we do ministry with—primarily adolescents and their families. The world the young now inhabit is the precarious, often painful, clearly confusing, and "abandoned" reality that middle adolescents (fourteen- to twenty-year-olds) and emerging adults (twenty- to early-thirty-year-olds) live within.

Each of these issues and the corresponding focus that results has created a new day for youth ministry. Over the past decade we have come to recognize and admit that we are losing ground in terms of our ability to theologically engage students in a way that engenders both current and lifelong faith even while we try to go theologically deeper ourselves. While each issue has received a great deal of attention, there is a growing consensus that these three are born of the same parent. Today's and tomorrow's youth worker cannot simply be aware of the dynamics that affect ministry to the young; they must thoughtfully and theologically engage them head-on, recognizing that the day of gathering kids in a dedicated youth wing or living room and getting them to sing and play and listen to a clever talk (regardless of how well delivered it is) no longer guarantees lifelong spiritual interest, much less life transformation. Without question there remain pockets where the "add water and stir" youth ministry model of an adult "leading" a group of five to fifteen

teenagers within the framework of a carefully crafted and strategically produced program works. Many of the kids in these churches do come through with an owned faith that they are able to take with them into the future. But that result is a rarity and almost certainly due to a great many other factors, such as deeply invested parents and a system that highly values the young (or momentum and budget). Even if we dig deeply into highly touted or stable ministries, it is hard not to see the same issues nipping at the heels of these highly "successful" model programs.

In surveying the literature on each of these questions in youth ministry circles and in society at large—the shallow, temporary faith of adolescents, the lack of trust in faith institutions, and the systemic isolation of hurting kids—there is a common denominator that bubbles to the surface and is consistently affirmed: our young desperately need and long for authentic community. For example, one of the central tenets of the Sticky Faith work of Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, Cheryl Crawford, and the faculty of the Fuller Youth Institute is that in order to contribute to the long-term faith of an adolescent, that adolescent must believe that he or she is known, valued, actively engaged, and proactively loved within a community (usually described as being composed of at least five nonparental Christian adults).[10] In David Kinnaman's work (especially as it is informed by practical theologian Andrew Root's reminder that the gospel calls us to participate "in Christ's risen presence" regardless of a young person's response),[11] ministry to the "Nones" must provide "authentic community" and "build bridges."[12] According to my research and continuing study of behaviors and attitudes of mid-adolescents in my book *Hurt 2.0*, the reason we have a generation

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that feels so alone is that they lack the social capital—that is, genuine, non-self-serving relationships—of knowing they have people in their corner to help them navigate their entry into an adulthood that is amorphous and a psychosocial moving target. In sum, each of these issues points us to not only the human condition throughout history but also our increasing collective individualism and atomization, which has created a generation of young people who need us more proactively than ever.[13] These three issues culminate in the recognition of the dearth of adult presence in the lives of children and teenagers in contemporary society around the world and comprise the context for youth ministry in the twenty-first century.

Adoptive Youth Ministry seeks to address each of these issues by appealing to and building from the core reason they exist: an erosion of what is sometimes called "social capital," which is necessary for any child to become an adult, and the lack of an adult community committed to the support and nurture of the young.[14] This is a book on youth ministry practice. Our premise is that any activity targeting the church's mission to the young must recognize and address the central reality that every young person faces, not only in the church but also in every aspect of their young lives. For teenagers and emerging adults to be included, welcomed, embraced, and invited as participants into a community of faith presupposes that the adults in that community want them around. This notion is the foundational prerequisite for youth ministry in today's society around the globe.

The Goal of Adoptive Youth Ministry

Adoptive Youth Ministry seeks to equip youth ministries, churches, and organizations that have been charged with the spiritual development of the young to facilitate a ministry of adoption into the local and global family of God. No chapter specifically details this new way of grounding our work, but each offers a specific strategy and theology for connecting the young into the larger faith community. While some chapters speak more directly to adoption, others do not. Each chapter and every author invited to speak in this volume (as well as on the website dedicated to the adoptive youth ministry conversation at youthministry.fuller.edu) is committed to this overall goal, which culminates in youth being received and embraced as full participants in the community of faith as siblings with other members of the body, even as they still need the social capital and nurture of the adults. The driving theological foundation of this book is the idea that all kids have gifts, talents, vision, and energy to bring to the family table. In bringing together a wide array of youth ministry leaders, thinkers, professors, practitioners, authors, and speakers who are committed to this single trajectory of ministry to help shape youth ministry practice for the next several decades, this book is unique. As you read you will be invited to reflect on many of the issues and responsibilities of youth ministry practice while being grounded in the theological foundation of familial adoption. As you read, discuss, and even connect with an author through the website, you will be able to do your work—to create ministry strategies, programs, events, and structure—in a way that is fully embedded within the community of faith and, more important, faithful to God's intent for passing the faith on from generation to generation as we serve our Lord in the work of the kingdom.