

ADOPTIVE CHURCH

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT
WHERE **EMERGING GENERATIONS** BELONG

CHAP CLARK

Foreword by STEVEN ARGUE


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In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



This book is for Dee: my partner, my friend, and my joy. Through the years we have loved, learned, and served together. Now we get the chance to influence and journey alongside a community that is trying to figure out what it means to be authentically faithful to God's call and therefore to learn to live as an adoptive family. The greatest joy? We get to do this together!

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FOREWORD

Where do all the great ministry leaders go when they grow older? They're still here—loving, serving, leading, and advocating for young people regardless of what position they hold. They're still convinced that the gospel remains great news for every generation. They're pro-church even though they've seen and experienced both its beauty and ugliness. They're a unique breed. They're people like Chap Clark.

As a young youth pastor, I had the benefit of learning from Chap through his writing and speaking. His ideas gave me helpful language and vision for the ministry experiences I encountered. As I matured and our paths crossed at conferences, two things struck me about Chap: he loves young people, and he loves people who love young people.

More recently, I have had the distinct opportunity to be Chap's colleague at Fuller Theological Seminary. While his work on campus and around the country is known by many, I personally witnessed the value he placed on harmonizing academic rigor with a pastoral heart. His influence on countless master's and doctoral students is profound, and I believe we will feel the ripple effect of Chap's investment well into the next generation of leaders.

Adoptive Church is not his next, new idea. In fact, Chap would say the concept is quite old, but it has yet to be realized in congregational

contexts. While youth ministry has become an essential element for most churches, it has typically morphed into a closed system that gets isolated from the congregation and outsourced to a youth pastor or a few caring adults. Such a system leaves senior leaders and youth leaders working in tandem but not together. Research indicates that an intergenerational dynamic is essential for influencing the way congregations form young people. Chap seeks to operationalize an intergenerational vision through an adoptive lens that reorients the roles of pastor, youth pastor, mentor, and young person as part of the family of God. His ideas will offer readers the helpful first steps they are looking for while calling them to make additional moves that may challenge their deeply held assumptions.

As you read this book also pay attention to its tone. What I have always appreciated about Chap is his unique ability to remind youth ministry rookies and veterans why they do what they do. His insights are encased with inspiration that perpetually says, “You love young people? So do I. Let’s do this!” Hear Chap’s voice as one who is more interested in cheering you on than dragging you down. I believe his encouragement has kept many youth ministry leaders from throwing in the towel.

Many pastors find their way into academics (I’m one of them). A select few find their way from the academy to the church. What I find especially unique about this book is that it is written by a tenured professor who has felt drawn to the pastorate to flesh out his adoptive ideas within his own local congregation. As you read Chap’s words, recognize that he is sweating out these convictions with you, cheering you on, and speaking a phrase that saved my own ministry soul numerous times, “I love you. You’re the best.”

Steven Argue

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the outcome of a lifetime of serving the young in the name of Christ. There are so many who have factored in to this project, for I have gleaned from hundreds—if not thousands—of people and sources that have influenced my thinking. So I acknowledge first that large pool of dedicated men and women that have served our Lord by loving the young and their families. You have shaped me far more than I could ever know.

There are also those specific people and places along the way that deserve an additional shout-out.

Young Life and the Young Life staff: I have been reared in the ministry and ethos of this global organization that remains focused on one thing—to introduce every young person to Jesus Christ. The Young Life family helped me to know the biblical Jesus, weaned me into the church, and invited me to join in their mission. Although I stopped receiving a paycheck many years ago, I have never stopped being one of you in this incredible mission to the young. Thank you for teaching me that every kid matters and is worth our very best thinking and effort.

The parish youth ministry family: Early on, my high school Young Life leader was clear: “You’ve gotten close to Christ with us, now give yourself to becoming part of his family.” This early experience

convinced me that no matter what we do in the name of youth or emerging adult ministry, our goal must be helping the young to see their place and their home within the body of Christ. For every youth worker who has ever served the young in the church, thanks for your dedication and the hard-won lessons that God has used to shape me.

To my friends and colleagues in Christian leadership: I have been so profoundly humbled to have been included in your guild. From being invited to serve and train on behalf of Youth Specialties, to inclusion on the stellar faculties of Denver and Fuller seminaries, to the chance to wrestle alongside insightful and dedicated colleagues who have led the way in youth and emerging adult ministry, I am deeply moved that you let me in the door with you. And to all who have invited me to write and speak all these years, I am indebted to you for letting me work out my understanding of this vital calling alongside you.

And to those who have specifically helped with the adoptive ministry movement: I am so grateful for the partnership of Steve Rabey, Mindy Coates Smith, Tom Combes; all the DMin students over the last few years; and PhD grads Jinna Jin and David Doong.



Welcome to the Adoptive Church

In Christ, we are each an essential part of an intentionally adoptive community that passes its heritage through the generations. . . . We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and function as the incarnation of Jesus Christ to one another.

—Scott Wilcher, *The Orphaned Generation*¹

If you could give me one word that would help me figure out how to do youth ministry well, what would that be?” asked the twenty-three-year-old youth ministry major who had just graduated and was about to start her new job.

A self-described “youth group kid,” she had grown up in church groups, had read many key books, had heard speakers at ministry conventions, and had been trained at one of the best Christian schools. Now she really wanted to know how to make ministry matter.

“Adoptive ministry,” I said.

“Um, so, do we *adopt* kids?”

“No, God adopts them when they come to faith. And the key is he adopts everyone who comes to him. We just get the privilege of helping young people live into the gift that God has for them. That’s youth ministry. That’s the church—the *adoptive church!*”

Maybe you're new to youth ministry and, like this enthusiastic, young youth worker, have come to this book wanting to get at the essence of the important calling you have answered.

Or perhaps you are a seasoned veteran of youth ministry who's looking for an overarching concept that could pull together all your years of study, work, and engagement with kids.

Or maybe you're somewhere in the middle: a parent, a pastor, or someone else who has witnessed plenty of youth ministry hits and misses. You're committed to ministry but realize things could be better, so you're open to a new conversation.

Whatever your reason for joining in the discussion, I want to welcome you and thank you for taking a step into this adventure I call adoptive youth ministry. It's not so much a new way of *doing* youth ministry as a new way of *thinking* about and then *framing* the work of youth ministry.

For years I taught and wrote that the point of youth ministry was not only to help young people come to know and ultimately trust and follow Jesus Christ but also to then help them connect to the larger body of Christ. I referred to this as "assimilating" the young into the body of Christ.²

A few years ago in an intensive doctor of ministry class at Fuller Seminary, one of the students challenged the word *assimilate*. The discussion became focused on the question, Whose church is it, anyway? And why should young people have to "assimilate" in order to be welcomed and received?

That started me on a mission to search the Scriptures and discover what the Bible says about who we are together. Two passages shouted out for my attention: "To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" and "The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (John 1:12; Rom. 8:15).

In other words, once upon a time you and I were lost and orphaned, but in Christ, God made a way for us to come home as his adopted children. Adoptive youth ministry is simply helping kids live into that truth.

Throughout this journey, several things have fundamentally changed how I think about youth ministry. First, children, adolescents, and emerging adults are not the “church of tomorrow” but are members in the church of today. Other leaders have discussed this issue, but adoptive ministry addresses it head-on.

Second, our main job is to help kids to be received, nurtured, and appropriately empowered to live into their place at the feasting table of the King (Matt. 22).

Third, youth ministry must be a *bridge* that reaches out and touches isolated, disconnected, and fragmented kids, encouraging them to accept Christ’s love and the love of God’s people.

These three aha moments form the basis of this book and the earlier multiauthored textbook *Adoptive Youth Ministry* (Baker Academic, 2016). In this book, we will flesh out what this means in shaping a youth ministry program that leads into lifelong faith among siblings in the body of Christ. We will begin with the goal of adoptive youth ministry, then look at how to structure ministry in your context that will lead to the goal, and finish with the fundamental practices that will keep your ministry vibrant not only for the young people in your community but also for the congregation as a whole.

As you read, you might find yourself asking questions about some of the wording or concepts that are sprinkled throughout the book. Some of these are common words used differently (such as *adoption*). Others might represent brand-new ways of thinking about our life together as followers of Christ or even as leaders. I have provided a quick guide in the appendix titled “Adoptive Church 101” that you might want to dog-ear, or even read before you begin, so you are able to track with the essential components of adoptive youth ministry.

One last thing before you join in the conversation. My career has been primarily focused on training people who care for the young—parents, youth workers, educators, therapists—and helping them understand and serve the young well. The lens through which I have seen our work in relation to the needs of kids has been youth ministry. My advocacy for the young has never changed, but throughout

the process of considering who we are together as God's household, I have come to see that by looking only through the lens of one particular group, I have missed out on seeing the whole. Adoptive youth ministry sees the church, and who we are together as God's household, and then creates a pathway for the young to enter into that family through youth ministry.

Adoptive ministry sees the church as Christ's body, the household of God, the home for everyone whom God has called. Our task is to develop the kind of strategy and create the kind of environment where young people can not only envision themselves as vital members of that flawed-yet-redeemed family but also be put on a pathway to actually experiencing this reality. That is adoptive youth ministry.

So buckle up and prepare to encounter some new ways of thinking, but also be ready to be encouraged by the journey ahead with students and young adults. Youth ministry as a movement has been on this trajectory for years. The adoptive church is youth ministry with a destination: the household of God.



1

Creating an Adoptive Youth Ministry

It is not enough to connect [teenagers] to a task, but to empower the church to help students to live into their mutual adoption as members of the family of God. As I reflect on this, I continue to dream of ways to make this more of a reality at our church.

—Parent newsletter from a youth pastor, April 2, 2017

Youth pastors were gathered for a morning seminar when I gave them the following scenario. You are applying for a job at a midsized church where you would follow a series of part-time youth directors who weren't ever able to get much going. Now the church wants to start over from scratch with a new youth leader. During your interview, one of the church's leaders says to you, "Blank slate here. If you were to come to our church, what questions would you ask yourself, and why?"

"OK," I told the youth workers, "you've got five minutes to write down your answers."

They furrowed their brows, wrote their questions, shared in small groups, and then voiced their opinions in a large group discussion. The discussion was lively, animated, and occasionally contentious, and everyone seemed deeply engaged. For the first few minutes, the youth workers focused their questions on the church's students:

- How do we get them to come (to events, church, camps, etc.)?
- How do we get kids to care (about the program, God, each other, us)?
- How do we get students to want to grow in their faith?
- How do we get nonchurched students in the door?

Soon, however, the group shifted to talking almost entirely about the church, asking questions like these:

- How involved are adults in the lives of kids? How involved do adults *want* to be in the lives of students?
- How do the older folks feel about the students in the church?
- Do students like going to church services? Do they feel welcomed and appreciated?
- Do adults—staff and laity—believe that teenagers have something to offer the church?

As I moderated the discussion, I was struck by how questions about these two areas—the students and the church—gradually converged into one. Most seemed to agree that to get students to care about the youth ministry, or about the church, or even about Jesus Christ, adults had to care about the students.

One of the elder leaders (he was all of forty years old!) stood up and said, “So, for us to lead kids to Christ, we also have to find a way to lead them into a church community that wants and values them.”

Heads nodded. We went to prayer. I thanked God for the discussion.

Youth ministry at its best is a reflection of the church—what I call the adoptive church—reaching out to a generation of young people who wonder where they fit. Our fundamental desire is to help each of our students come into a vibrant, genuine relationship with Jesus that will last a lifetime.

For that to happen, they need to somehow locate themselves within a community that not only reflects their faith but also enhances and deepens it. To be committed to loving kids in Christ’s name means somehow helping them to find their home among God’s people, the local church.

This is our biblical and theological calling. I call this adoptive youth ministry. And discussions like the one I had with those youth workers show why more leaders are embracing the adoptive ministry model.

Adoptive Youth Ministry: Bringing Together the Church and Kids

The concept of adoption isn’t new or radical. We’ve all known people who have adopted a child, or have been adopted themselves, or both. It’s easy for us to envision youth ministry as “adoption” because of what goes into the process of adoption: a child who, for whatever reason, didn’t have a family finds a new, welcoming family that wants and loves this child.

I’ve found that people can quickly and easily embrace adoptive ministry concepts, such as having students “adopt” elderly adults in the church, or having church families “adopt” young people who lack supportive families.

“Adoptive” offers a good way to think about, describe, and strategize youth ministry. As John tells us, “To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). Paul picks up this lingo five times in his letters, reminding us that we who follow Christ have been “adopted to sonship” (or daughtership)¹ and are now able to call God not only our

Father but “Abba,” a term used by Paul twice that “conveyed both a sense of warm intimacy and also filial respect.”²

In the adoptive church we don’t actually “adopt” each other; rather, we recognize that each of us, in Christ, has been adopted by God. This changes everything about what it means for us to be together as a body. We are, as followers of Jesus, officially related to each other. We are spiritual siblings. Christian kin.

The lively discussion I had with those youth workers that morning focused on relationships, particularly relationships between adults and students. Adoptive youth ministry is an intentional and strategic process for creating the kind of environment where young people can feel valued and included and where adults can receive and empower the young. It is based on the theological truth that whoever is “in Christ”³ is an adopted sibling of everyone else “in Christ,” regardless of gender, ethnicity, location in the world, denomination, or even, yes, age. Old Christians are big brothers and sisters of young Christians.

This is the foundation on which adoptive youth ministry thrives. The goal of adoptive ministry is that everything we think, do, and plan should enhance those familial relationships. Let’s see how that can play out in real life.

Essentials of Adoptive Youth Ministry

In the first book that talked about adoptive ministry, *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, as editor and contributor I made the case for adoptive youth ministry. A few months later I contributed to and edited the first full book on this idea, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*. There I laid out the basic premise of what it means to see the ultimate end of youth ministry being young people deeply integrated in God’s household on earth known as the local church. In the first two chapters of that book I explain the concept of adoptive ministry, and then twenty-three other authors—all respected and experienced youth ministry

leaders—write about how they envision this happening in a given aspect of youth ministry. Although the contributors had various levels of familiarity with the specifics of adoptive ministry, the book’s value is that everyone had the same outcome in mind.

This book, in contrast to the first two, is designed to help you explore how adoptive youth ministry can strengthen and enhance your current ministry to both young people and the broader church body. First, I set the stage by explaining the rationale and goal behind adoptive youth ministry as a framework for doing youth ministry. Next, I will help you take steps to implement the kind of contextual ministry strategy that you and your community need in order to connect young people with the local body. Then, I will help you integrate best practices that enhance adoptive ministry for the long haul. Finally, we will explore ways to bring about change in faith communities that may be resistant to change.

These approaches can help you create the kind of environments where young people’s faith and life can flourish as they become more integrated, loved, and empowered as members of God’s household on earth.

First, let’s examine the four essentials of an adoptive youth ministry and an adoptive church.

Living according to Our Mutual Adoption in Christ

In John 6, when Jesus was asked what “work” God required of people, he simply said, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29). As mentioned, in John 1:12 we read that whoever has believed in Jesus is given “the right [i.e., privilege, reality] to become children of God” by God’s adoption. This means, of course, that every person who sincerely desires to belong to Christ has been adopted by God and is therefore a member of God’s household (Eph. 2:19).

Adoptive ministry nicely summarizes what it means to be adopted into the family of God as children of God. Once we’re adopted, we

live according to our adoption by learning how all of us can live together. Since it takes a lifetime to shed the residue of the past and embrace what God has declared is true about us, we need not only each other but also the Holy Spirit in our midst to prompt and empower our calling.

The Strong Must Seek Out and Help the Weak

What do most siblings do when one of their brothers or sisters is struggling or hurting? They gather around and help the afflicted sibling. That kind of care should be the model in God's family.

It is not up to the weak, vulnerable, or disempowered to initiate a connection with the powerful and dominant. Those who feel excluded to the fringes of a congregation or Christian community assume they don't have the social capital to approach those who are reigning in the center. We can't expect the vulnerable to engage the strong, so it's up to the more mature and interconnected family members to engage those who are weak or disempowered.

Jesus modeled this approach in John 13 when he washed the disciples' feet, even those of his betrayer, Judas! The strong must help the weak, particularly in adoptive youth ministry. Adolescents and emerging adults who are in transition can feel weak and vulnerable when confronted with a family they're not a part of. Those who are older, more established, and more secure in church congregations must build bridges of trust and inclusion with those who are young, less established, or less secure.

Ministry to the Vulnerable Is a Bridge

In the introduction I described adoptive youth ministry as a *bridge* ministry. A bridge ministry is one that exists not for its own sake or the pleasure of its own constituents but rather for the sake of those served. People involved in bridge ministries see themselves as the connecting point between young people seeking a place in the world and members of the family of God.

In a sense, any ministry can be a bridge ministry. Ministry to singles is a bridge to people who don't feel like they fit into a family-values environment. Ministry to the elderly provides a bridge to people who often feel cut off from the world and other people. Divorce recovery ministry is a bridge to people who've suffered tremendous sorrow and pain in their most intimate relationships.

At any time, there are needy populations observing our congregation to see if there's a place for them. Targeted ministry to specific, neglected (or underreached) populations is helpful and necessary, especially if trust with those who are in that population needs to be developed. Because a bridge ministry takes people from one world into another, a solid strategy and targeted programming are invaluable.

The Role of Leaders Is to Include and Empower Everyone

When all members of a community begin to see themselves as siblings, there may be a sense that some leadership roles will fade away. But let's not confuse roles with status. A leader may have an important role in a community that may entail using authority and power in the fulfillment of their calling. But this doesn't mean the leader is more valuable, worthy, gifted, or talented than any other member.

We have roles because in our fallen world we need people to use their particular gifts and resources to provide structure so our family can function harmoniously. Hierarchy and the appropriate use of organizational power are necessary in any group or system. Yet in a group of siblings, no leader matters more than the lowliest, newest member. Adoptive ministry needs strong, humble leaders with accountability in place to prevent the leaders from becoming self-important to the point where they fail to recognize who is being left behind. These leaders must make sure that the vulnerable are nurtured, empowered, and included in the church body.

What Adoptive Ministry Is and Is Not

Having outlined the four essentials, let me clarify three things that adoptive youth ministry is and is not.

Adoptive Ministry Is a Family, Not an Adoption Agency

Don't get me wrong, folks. I am employing an analogy, not declaring that your youth ministry must transform itself into a legal adoption agency.

Adoptive ministry doesn't mean I adopt another person into my biological family. Rather, it means that followers of Jesus determine to live out our adoption in God's family together as a community. I'm describing a way of thinking and living. Because we have all been adopted by a loving God as his children, we need to grow into and help each other discover what that means.

Adoptive Ministry Is a Unified Family, Not a Collection of Disconnected Subgroups

Many ministry leaders love the fact that churches often function as a set of separate entities (men's ministry, women's ministry, worship, children, youth, college, singles, seniors, etc.). But adoptive ministry leaders revel in working with the whole family of God.

The separation and disconnection caused by putting people into distinct groups have taken a severe toll on the unity Christ said should characterize his body ("This is my command: Love each other," John 15:17). Often what is talked about in youth group is different from, or even at odds with, what the elderly talk about in their group. All too often ministries exist for their own sake, and this is the opposite of adoptive ministry.

This is especially true when it comes to adolescents and emerging adults. Our calling is to connect each and every one to the whole congregation in real and meaningful ways. So while inviting high school students to join a men's retreat may be a good strategy so that

the young men begin to connect with older men in the congregation, you also need a bridge strategy to connect these young men to the larger church family, where they build more relationships with more members of the body.

Adoptive Ministry Is Building Family Connections, Not Piling on Programs

The heart of adoptive ministry is to reach out to anyone who is vulnerable, on the outside of the group, or who worries that they will never be accepted as an equal member. Solid programs and structures can help this bridge process as long as we don't allow ourselves to confuse programs with connections. Most young people by definition feel vulnerable and worry about acceptance, at least at times, even in the church. This vulnerability is what needs to be addressed, and this is the point of adoptive youth ministry.

It often takes a while for outsiders to join a community and feel comfortable there. Your existing programming and structures offer newcomers a framework through which they can naturally enter into the broader life of the group. Leaders need to offer focused programming while simultaneously moving every member toward greater inclusion in the larger body.

Foundations of Adoptive Church Ministry: Three Core Competencies

Adoptive Church is designed as a nuts-and-bolts resource to help adults nurture the faith and lives of emerging generations. I want to help you strategically apply a biblical theology of ministry to *in-betweens*, young people who are no longer children but not yet adults. The idea behind *Adoptive Church* is that any church or organization can embrace an adoptive ministry model that will help young people and others experience full inclusion in the body of Christ.

You can play a significant role in leading your church or group toward an adoptive model that creates the kind of community and relational atmosphere where young people can live into their mutual adoption into God’s family. I will show you how to navigate these waters while also seeking leadership buy-in. One essential for your journey is a solid grounding in the three core competencies required to move your group or congregation closer to an adoptive model.

(I believe these are essentials for *any* church that seeks to function as a Christ-centered body, but they are especially important in creating the kind of environment where members of God’s family of all ages can thrive together.)

The three core competencies for developing an adoptive church ministry are the following:

1. Pursuing intentional community
2. Living in service on behalf of one another
3. Welcoming the outsider

Pursuing Intentional Community (Ephesians 4:16)

There are only a few places in the Gospels when Jesus says, “Pay attention, I mean this one. Write it down, talk about it, and make sure this is at the forefront of everything you do.” When he does, it deserves special notice. In John 15:1–17, on the night before he was killed, Jesus gave one of these talks to his friends and disciples. “I am the vine; you are the branches,” he said, reminding me that I am not to live on my own as an individual branch, but I am to hang out with my fellow branches.

Then in verse 12, and again in verse 17, he tells us, “This is my command: Love each other.” These were among the last direct words Jesus said to his closest friends hours before being killed. The importance of this new command, especially at this final hour, cannot be overstated. Jesus’s command to love each other is at the heart of his mission and message.

In Ephesians 4:16, Paul reminds the gathered followers of Jesus that intimate relationships and connectedness is a partnership of the work of God through the Spirit and the work of the people: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” It is God who bonds us together as a household of children, but it is up to each of us to “do our work” as we engage with, listen to, encourage, and support one another. We do our work, and the Holy Spirit does his. That is how we grow.

If you want to build a community that welcomes and receives the young as siblings, there must be a community willing and able to receive them. This is what the youth pastors in the seminar were so concerned about. How can we trust a church that in reality is not all that interested in being a community to offer intentional body life to them? It’s simple, really. Without a commitment to pursuing this competency, adoptive youth ministry will remain really tough.

Living in Service on Behalf of One Another (John 13:1-17)

This competency might be a little more difficult for some readers to envision, but it is so clearly biblical that it would seem like every church would at least be talking about it. In all four Gospels, Jesus makes it really clear: we find life when we give it away.

John 13 includes an example of this kind of self-emptying love. In the upper room on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus does the unthinkable. He washes the disciples’ feet, even though it was unheard of for an esteemed rabbi to do such a thing. Jesus then does something more mystifying: he tells the disciples to do for each other what he has done for them. By instructing them to wash one another’s feet, Jesus establishes a permanent bond between humility and leadership. This bond should be evident in Jesus’s followers for all time.

Today when we wash feet, it is often so symbolic that it might not mean much. But when we have the attitude of ancient foot washers,

when we are willing to take up the towel, get on our knees, and offer our service on behalf of someone else, then we are living into what Jesus told his friends that night.

If a church acknowledges that service is its basic posture, and members practice sacrificial hospitality toward one another and the world at large, adoptive youth ministry will be a natural fit. But if a church is less familial and more private or divided into subgroups, adoptive ministry may have a hard time taking hold.

Welcoming the Outsider (Hebrews 13:2)

When you carefully study the life of Jesus and look for new insights into who he was on earth, it's tough to miss how he treated the broken, the failed, the outcast, the outsider.

Every time he encountered someone who could be considered vulnerable, he was tender and gentle in his dealings with them. He was only harsh with those who should know better, such as his disciples and the religious leaders.

Consider Jesus's encounter with the woman at the well in John 4. When he asks her to go call her husband, knowing full well that she had had five husbands and was living with another man currently, Jesus knew that the timing of this encounter had given him the space to enter her world in this way. He demonstrated even there that his intentions were kind, not condemning, because the woman not only stayed but also engaged more deeply with him. Jesus was consistently hospitable to the vulnerable.

Openness to outsiders is a core part of what it means to be a Christ-centered community. As Hebrews 13:2 puts it, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

If a congregation is seriously grappling with how it can relate to those who feel neglected or "outside," there's a good chance young people may feel they're wanted and loved. Being welcoming is a way of developing the spiritual practice of hospitality. This can be a sign

to young people that they're approaching a family they can relate to and be a part of.

But don't bother pretending to be welcoming if you're not really committed. Young people can smell a superficial hello a mile away. They know the difference between "forty-five seconds of friendly" and a true invitation to relationship.

This issue comes up frequently in youth ministry. Churches that have a mission statement that shouts "All are welcome" sometimes can get a little nervous when neighborhood kids whose parents want nothing to do with the church take over the middle school program. Yet, if church leaders are willing to address our easily conflicting values of wanting the best for "our own kids" while also knowing the importance of being a welcoming community to outsiders, then adoptive youth ministry can be a great catalyst for deeper exploration of how to address that conflict.

Including students as fully invested and celebrated participants in the full life of God's household is the ultimate test of how deeply a church is willing to go to make sure that the community functions as a family of siblings. This is where *Adoptive Church* veers from the last four or five decades of youth ministry history.

We can no longer "do" youth ministry. We must live as the church, the family of God. Youth ministry that focuses only on students and neglects the larger body is not a fully biblical youth ministry. It's youth work in a Christian cultural setting.

When God brought us into his family, he didn't give us the option of disconnecting ourselves from one another. We can't really call ourselves members of the church of Jesus Christ if that's our attitude. In Christ, you and I are adopted siblings in God's household, and we belong to each other, whether we feel vulnerable or dominant. This is the foundational premise of adoptive youth ministry.