

Some thoughts on Canadian Reformed *Young People Societies (YPS)*

Introduction

Enclosed is a brief report on the status of a young people's society or gathering (from now on YPS) in a Canadian Reformed congregation in Southwestern Ontario. For the purpose of this report we will call it Church A. The study was completed in order to unearth some of the issues facing the youth especially in relation to consistent and enriching YPS meetings, as well as to provide some ideas, or ask some questions, in order to help develop a stronger vision for the YPS at Church A. To that end, meetings were held and information was received from members of the YPS, couples who assist in providing leadership to the YPS, as well as teachers from Guido de Bres and a few ministers from within the Canadian Reformed churches. This report is a compilation of these exchanges and some of my own ideas. For the privacy of those who shared their ideas with me, I do not state their name in the body of the report, unless approval was given.

The report is not an exhaustive study on the present status of the YPS. Realizing that, this report does not include the following.

- a. A comprehensive survey of each of the members of this YPS.
- b. A list of effective study materials for this YPS.
- c. A guide of resources available to help leaders become more effective in their roles.
- d. A discussion on a pre-YPS initiative (e.g. Gems and Cadets, or its equivalent).

Following the table of contents, the report begins with a discussion on the value and definition of YPS, which is followed by a survey of the present situation at Church A and brief overview of some of the broader issues facing our youth. With this material as a backdrop, a number of recommendations are provided to strengthen the YPS at Church A.

It should be noted that some of the recommendations provided may not work in each and every congregation. Notwithstanding, the hope and prayer is that some of the ideas provided may help stimulate a more vibrant, God-honouring and enriching YPS in your church.

SDG!

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1. ESTABLISHING THE VALUE FOR FYPS

When answering the question, “why do we have YPS?”, sundry answers were given. Although most began with the importance of studying God’s Word, there was no consistent voice on how that should be done, or what else could be done. For example, some focused on inductive Bible Study of one book as the means to a good YPS event while others preferred a study guide. Some stressed that it is important to discuss issues and do this with one’s own peer group, while others pointed out that there needs to be more mentorship so that younger members can grow through the encouragement and example of older members. And, finally, others shared how important YPS is for learning how to express one’s faith openly and to serve together as fellow believers.

Compiling all of these answers together allows us to see something of the breadth and importance of YPS. However, we would be amiss if we did not ground this answer in Scripture. To be sure, Scripture does not prescribe YPS gatherings as such. However, there is no lack of Scriptural directives concerning the training of our youth so that they may know their Lord. This training begins, we learn in Scripture, at home. The nuclear family is the spawning ground for covenantal living. Therefore, we read in Deuteronomy 6:6-7, “*These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*”

The nuclear family spills over into the larger, church family. Indeed, it takes a covenant-community to raise a covenant child. So the Psalmist writes in Psalm 71:17, “*Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.*” Notice that he writes that God has taught him. What are the means that God employed to teach this youth? We can assume a covenantal home life played a large part of that training, but so did the Temple and the priesthood, that is, the Church of the old covenant.

Therefore, if the home is the spawning ground for covenantal living then the Church supplies the necessary nutrients for this faith to grow. To the church belongs the preaching, the teaching, the sacraments, the fellowship and equally important the spurring on of one another to love and good deeds. And therefore the church would be remiss if it did not employ something like YPS to serve as a way to train the youth in Scripture and spur them on. For this reason YPS needs to include the following: first, the teaching and learning of Scripture as well as encouraging each other to walk in the faith; and second, the application of that through serving the communion of saints and the broader community as the Lord opens doors.

In summary, then:

First, every YPS should be a gathering of the church's youth in a secure, non-judgmental environment where -- together with the assistance of more mature members of the congregation-- they may explore and grapple with the riches of God's Word and apply it to their lives. And also where they can learn to express their faith in a personal way, to pray and to grow in their ability to lead, and strengthen one another in the faith.

Second, YPS must be a place where the youth can learn to show love and good deeds, or to have "dirty hands and dirty knees." That is, it is here that they can learn the art of serving—both within the communion of saints and the world around them.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT SITUATION IN CHURCH A's YPS

There are a number of issues hindering a vibrant, well-functioning YPS. This is also the case at Church A. Some of the issues that presently face this YPS surround attendance and participation. However, there are also some structural issues that need to be addressed. We will consider these issues and then complete this report with some more positive signs.

a. Attendance/Participation

On a well-attended evening, attendance at Church A's YPS is said to hover around sixty percent. One interviewee argued that fifty percent of the youth have some desire to be there; another twenty-five percent are there because they have to go but their participation is poor; and the following twenty-five percent generally do not go, at all. Taking those percentages at face value, one can conclude that actual participation may be less than sixty percent. This may arguably be the case in most Canadian Reformed churches.

The following reasons were given:

First, there is a lack of leadership or ownership concerning announcements. Not surprisingly, if announcements are not composed on time or are changed at the last minute, then this has a direct effect on attendance.

Second, the lives of the youth seem to be too busy. Although this should not directly translate into poor attendance for any YPS event on Sunday evening, some argued that it does. Possibly, the member's lives are so busy they need Sunday evening 'off' to catch their breath. Or, family and friend commitments coupled with speeches and worship events in other churches are possibly some other factors causing poorer attendance. Although, it should be added, these Sunday evening activities are generally not wrong in themselves.

Third, some young people may not make YPS a priority because of the following reasons.

- “There are cliques and this make me feel like an outsider in my own church.”
- “My friends aren’t there and therefore I don’t feel I fit in.”
- “The same people do all the talking.”
- “It is the same ‘stuff’ we get at school and at catechism.”
- “I’m too afraid to talk.”
- “We always get hung up on minor details.”

Fourth, the development of *College and Careers* or *Twenty-Something Bible Studies*. It seems that those who are ‘College and Career’ age generally leave YPS. This not only directly affects the possible numbers of those who could attend, and it also inevitably draws something of the life-blood from the YPS as these older members could serve as leaders and mentors to the group.

b. Organizational issues.

There were also some structural issues that were addressed by a number of the interviewees.

First, there are issues surrounding the leadership. This issues seem to be more than merely someone or some people not taking leadership. There seems to be both a lack of vision when it comes to the role of the leaders as well as a lack of proper procedure in choosing these leaders. One of the interviewees pointed out that generally speaking leaders are picked on the grounds of their ‘*time*’ in YPS and, or, their popularity within the group. In short, it was argued, there is sometimes a lack of spiritual maturity in the leadership. Subsequently, the newly appointed leaders lack the God-given passion or the endurance to see the YPS complete its year. Often, I was told, they aren’t really leading or sort of disappear halfway through the season.

Second, there seems to be a lack of training. Without training the leaders do not have the necessary tools to effectively lead a study session.

Third, there are questions surrounding the layout of the study material. Although the question and answer format is helpful, I am told it can serve as the death knell to stimulating discussions and deducing relevant application. One of the reasons presented was that due to the length of the Q/A section of the LifeChange books the application questions were often overlooked.

Fourth, there seems to be a lack of consistory involvement. It was argued that the consistory did not visit enough and, or, were too much at arms length from YPS. Of course, I have no way to verify this nor do I know if there is a perfect number of visits. However, this falls under structural issues in so much as the consistory liaisons need to frequent these meetings for there to be a good line of communication between the leadership of the church and the youth.

Fifth, there is a lack of mature couples to help lead. Although it is good to have one couple who have both a love and passion for the youth, this is not sustainable for the long run. Sunday evenings are, of course, ‘sacred’ for everyone and no less to them as they like to spend this time with family and friends as well. It was argued that in order for there to be a couple at each meeting or mature single member, then the work needs to be shared.

c. Positive signs

To be sure, in all my interviews there were always beams of light falling on the floor of Church A’s YPS. All the interviewers shared some of the good aspects of YPS. They enjoy the time of worship. They enjoy meeting at homes. They have enjoyed digging into the Word and sharing in a number of the discussions. Many appreciate the camaraderie that is shared. And each year the YPS has run there have been those who do share their gifts within the group, whether through music, fostering better discussions or serving. In the past, there was much excitement around the YPS weekend organized by Church A’s YPS. At the same time, all the interviewers feel that things could improve and there is a general lack of vision for the group.

3. OVERVIEW OF SOME OF THE LARGER ISSUES FACING OUR YOUTH

There are, of course, issues facing our youth that transcend the four walls of Church A. In order to assist us in drawing up a few recommendations, some of these issues must be noted, even if there is no simple solution in solving them. I have enumerated four issues, while understanding that there are possibly many more.

a. A weak local-church consciousness

Partly due to our times, partly due to the number of CanRCs in the area and partly due to one high-school with a large catchment area, there seems to be a weak local-church consciousness among our youth. It is easy for the youth to find their emotional, physical and spiritual support outside the peer group from the local church. Attendance at YPS meetings serves as a bit of a barometer reading for this. There is no fast and ready solution to this problem.

b. A general inability and apathy towards Bible study and sharing the faith

A number of our young people have great difficulty talking about matters of the faith. Though, it has been observed by a few teachers from Guido deBres that those who serve at Campfire! or assist at Streetlight or have gone on a short-term mission trip are more prepared to share their faith with others than those who have not participated in these acts of service. To that end, it is a blessing that many of Church A’s youth have served in these various inter-church projects. This does not mean, however, that these inter-church activities are prerequisites for sharing the faith. Generally, the

home is where such openness is nurtured. Therefore, the conclusion could be made that some families, maybe many may not be really nurturing their youth to be able to express their faith openly.

It was also noted that many young people in general do not study the Bible on their own. If there is no passion for the Word in one's personal life, there will be no passion for the Word in the presence of others. This is both a spiritual issue and to some degree a home issue. Passion can be very contagious.

c. A technological and Internet age

The issues surrounding the present state of technology and the Internet differ in degree from young person to young person. Many young men struggle with pornographic material and this affects every area of their life. Some are consumed by guilt and shame. Others try to cover it up, but have lost something of their passion for the things of God. Some young women deal with self-esteem issues and find it quite easy to put their peers down. Technology like iphones, twitter, facebook, etc., can provide a venue for fueling this insecurity through gossip. Therefore, there could be a correlation between YPS participation and technology in two ways. Young men consumed by guilt or shame or lust may not wish to participate in YPS. While young women may feel betrayed and not willing to be part of something if they don't feel they 'fit' in.

Further, both male and female feel the unprecedented burden of being plugged in. Someone shared that it is not uncommon for many youth to text some 200 messages in a day whether sent or received. And further, it is not uncommon for youth to be "texting" rather than participating in the discussion on hand. The burden to be connected and respond instantaneously can severely hammer good discussion.

I write about this with a high degree of ignorance. One teacher pointed out that we as parents—even young parents—are like immigrants to the new land of technology, while our young are its citizens. For many parents it is like learning a new language. This makes it difficult to know exactly what is happening in this arena and to know what the possible fallout may be.

d. General laxness in male leadership

More than once it has been pointed out that young males are not prepared to lead. This is moving outside of Church A's burden to the broader CanRC community. Campfire!, for example, constantly has to pry, prod and persuade young men to serve at camp. The question is why? Why is there this spiritual depression when it comes to young male leadership? This is not a new problem but it is a persistent and growing one. Again, one might wonder if there is any correlation with the Internet and the sites young men frequent and their general ineptness in serving and leading. Such a study could possibly be made. Still another factor is materialism. This

translates into a life so preoccupied with earning more money and having more possessions that the things of God become less and less important, including YPS.

4. RECOMMENDATION FOR CHURCH A's YPS

“Leadership is key,” stated Dr. Steve Foster a teacher at Guido deBres High School in an email to me. Him and his wife, Marg Lodder, have assisted in facilitating the YPS in Guelph. Some of my recommendations stem from discussions with Dr. Foster. At the same time, leadership without vision is equally detrimental for the growth of anything, even YPS. Therefore the recommendations are generally built on the importance of both good leadership and good vision.

LEADERSHIP:

(1) **Facilitators:** There should be a few couples or individuals who should be appointed to serve as **facilitators**. These facilitators should be mature couples (or individuals) who are ‘young at heart’ and have a passion for the youth of the church. The hope is that by having more than one couple facilitating there will be a facilitator(s) at each YPS event. Their role is primarily to mentor, foster, pray with and encourage especially the section leaders (please see next point 2) to help YPS to reach their vision (please see point 4). These facilitators should receive an evening of training with their Pastor and possibly with others who have worked extensively with youth (e.g. teachers from Guido de Bres High School). This should be set up at the beginning of the year. If possible, a book list should also be provided them so that they can begin to read and explore some of the issues facing our youth, and ways to work through and around these issues. (Unfortunately, I do not have time to provide this list).

(2) **Section leaders:** The facilitators should in turn appoint four or five mature young people—maybe those in the twenty-something age group—as **section leaders**. These section leaders should be mature and motivated Christians who take responsibility for a group (or section) of the YPS of no more than 4 or 5 members. Partially akin to a Campfire! cabin pack concept, they should work to build relationships with their section, share contact information and events and serve as accountability partners in order to promote healthy boundaries in all areas of life, especially the Internet. It would be important for these section leaders to receive some training as well. In the end, the section leader has to be able to foster better interaction within the group and ensure that the more ‘fringe’ members feel part of the YPS. Finally, it is important to note that during a YPS gathering, the section leader is not required to lead only his ‘section.’ Rather, the group is divided up more randomly and the section leaders serve in one of the smaller groups. However, outside of the actual Sunday evening study, the section leaders are still responsible for their ‘section.’

(3) **Merging:** The facilitators need to encourage the twenty-something Bible Study (College and Careers) to merge with the YPS for the purpose of mentoring and

fostering greater growth and maturity in both groups (as per point 2). This is critical. Further, for there to be growth in the YPS there needs to be greater continuity from one year to another. Having young people stay for only three or four years does not provide this continuity.

VISION

(4) VISION is an imperative since without a vision the youth move from one year to another without seeing the benefits or the fruits of having YPS. For vision to form, it needs to be cast. Have the facilitators and the section leaders, as well as the Council liaisons sit down and cast vision for the year. Some questions that need to be addressed as they cast this vision are as follows:

- ➔ What are some of the relevant issues facing the youth (internet porn, insecurity, self-worth and financial worth, relativism, materialism etc)? And how will these be addressed in our Bible Study?
- ➔ What study-guide material will we use, or will we do a more inductive Bible study as we work through a certain book, or will we work through certain Biblical topics, or both?
- ➔ What are some various methods that could be employed in the running of our YPS gatherings so that they remain dynamic, unpredictable and relevant? (Occasionally, engage in book reviews, invite guest speakers, research and share a certain issue, etc).
- ➔ How will we seek to create better unity, abolish clichés, and include fringe members? This needs to be proactive. For example, section leaders need to build relationships especially with the fringe members.
- ➔ How will we foster an environment where everyone will be encouraged to share their faith, their burdens and have the courage to pray? And, how will we build greater community within the group? E.g. a weekend at Campfire! or serve together on a mission trip, or engage in other outings.
- ➔ How will we serve with ‘dirty hand and dirty knees’ the communion of saints? Some examples may be visiting older members of the congregation, serving at a potluck, participating in a building drive fundraiser, or worship evenings.
- ➔ How will we serve with ‘dirty hands and dirty knees’ the broader community? E.g. adopt a ‘love *name of city*’ idea (e.g. Jubilee church in Ottawa who provide socks, soup and Scripture), serve at Streetlight, visit old age homes, collect non-perishable food items etc.

Once the vision is tentatively cast it needs to be brought to the members of the YPS and their input should also be expected. All the youth need to feel a part of this vision. Some of the issues shared above should not be forgotten in the vision setting. It is important that tangible and realistic goals are met and after each season there needs to be a discussion on what worked and what didn’t and how things could be improved. It is important as well that neither the facilitators nor the section leaders become discouraged when some aspects of the vision are not met. The fact is that we

generally have strong ideals but are weak willed. For this reason, the vision needs to be forged through prayer and a deep dependence on God's wisdom and blessing.

RELATED MATTERS:

(5) Council's role. Council needs to encourage the growth and support the vision of YPS. This also means that they have to agree to this vision. Therefore the appointed liaisons to YPS need to participate in the vision casting and build good rapport both with the facilitators but especially the section leaders. The goal of trying to attend at least one YPS function a month should be set.

(6) Plan inter-generational events. The hospitality committee or the evangelism committee under the auspices of the Council should plan activities that involve the whole congregation. The theory behind this idea is that for youth to become servant leaders and sharers of the Gospel their parents have to join hands in this 'work.'. These congregation wide activities could either be internal events (i.e. to bless the communion of saints, potlucks, fundraisers etc) or external events (i.e. to bless the greater community). I know some CanRC and URC churches have a fun retreat at Campfire! or serve there by participating in work activities together. These inter-generational events may seem to be a little passé for the youth, but some of the more mature youth of Church A shared how important it is for the youth to be part of these activities.

(7) Prayer is the life-blood! Someone once commented that if the Holy Spirit was to pull out of the local church 90 percent of the activities would continue as if nothing changed. We may not agree to such a prognosis of our local churches, or say it that way, but there is in that a question. Do we wait on God in ardent prayer as we plan our church's programs? The YPS program is an important building block in their spiritual maturity and therefore they need to pray and be held in constant prayer.

May God richly bless you as you seek to serve His Church and spur on His youth!