COMPETING to COMPLETING

by Travis Deans

I Propose a Revolution in Youth Ministry

Back in the early 1990s, I was a youth ministry major at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. For one class, we read Mark Senter's book *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry*. I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Senter's well-researched history of youth ministry, but I remember being incredibly curious – what in the world could this coming revolution in youth ministry be?

Ten years later, I suppose someone could easily argue that the postmodern/emerging church phenomenon is that revolution. Some might suggest that our 21st Century technology qualifies as revolutionizing youth ministry (iPods, blogging, video cell phones, etc…).

However, as monumental as those recent changes are, I am totally captivated by something else – something that has been waiting 400 years (give or take a few) to come to fruition. I'm talking about communities all over the country where youth leaders in Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Assembly of God, Anglican, Free Methodist, and other churches are discovering a youth ministry resource that they never knew they had…*each other!*

In the youth ministry training that I've had, I feel like there's a huge void of teaching on how youth leaders in a community should relate to each other. Youth leaders are often taught to do youth ministry as if, for all practical purposes, their youth ministry is the only game in town. However, what I see out in the trenches of youth ministry is a hunger to get out of our separate ditches and find out who's got what ammunition and how to make the best use of it.

How should youth leaders relate to the other youth leaders and churches in their communities? A good friend of mine suggested using a diagram from the *Harvard Business Review on Managing People*[1] to help us picture four ways that churches can relate to each other: *competing* against each other, *communicating* to each other, *cooperating* with each other, or *completing* each other.

Competing against each other

Many of us have experienced this scenario: you're at a gathering of youth leaders and the inevitable question comes up, "How many kids are in your youth ministry?" Expressions of competition can run the gamut from that mild question to a comment I heard recently from a church secretary to a couple as they left the church: "Don't go to such-and-such church. It's of the devil."

The bottom left hand corner of our chart represents churches with a low level of relationship and a low level of shared objectives and strategy. These are churches competing against each other, whether they admit it or not. Recently, a couple told my wife that their pastor would not let the church's members attend events at other churches because he did not want his people to leave his church. At that same moment, in the same room, a youth pastor told me that the churches in his community have such a terrible spirit of competition that they don't do *anything* together.

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The problem with churches competing against each other is that no matter who wins, they all lose. It's the enemy's successful "divide and conquer" strategy. If Christ's church is a body, then it must be a hacked-up body (flash back to all the horror movies you've ever seen). We have pieces of the body that think they are the whole body, and other pieces who think they have no need for the rest of the body. The point is this: a hacked-up body (human or the church) cannot get much done.

Having said that, there is such a thing as healthy competition. In the business world, competition keeps companies doing their best – producing the best products with the least amount of waste and with the best treatment of customers. Could it be true that healthy competition could prevent churches from becoming lazy, mediocre, and tame? I think some churches are growing because they are doing their best – and some aren't because they just aren't willing to invest adequate resources in their own students.
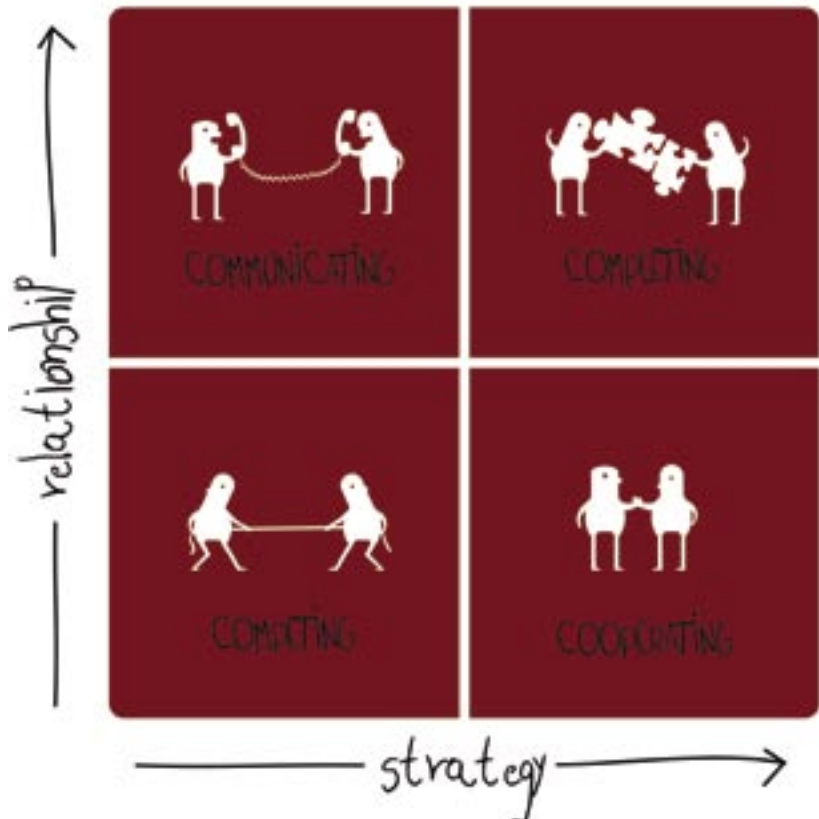
David Murrow, author of *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, points out that the church by and large has jettisoned the masculine qualities of competition, achievement, and risk-taking[2] – and it's not a good thing. What if youth leaders in a community decided to spur each other on to be more effective? What would happen if youth leaders in a community got together to sharpen each other? Sparks might fly, but we would each emerge better for it, and our communities would have better youth leaders serving them. If we ignore the other youth leaders in our community, who is going to sharpen us and keep us on our toes?

Communicating to each other

Going back to our chart, in the upper left quadrant are youth leaders who want to reach out to others in their community, but unless they have some shared objectives or goals, they end up merely communicating *to* other churches.

Here's another classic situation: you are together with a bunch of youth leaders and someone starts passing out flyers for their church's upcoming event. The problem with merely "communicating to" is that churches tend to look at other churches' events with

suspicion: "If my kids go to their activity, they might like it better over there."

Many times youth leaders have told me about great events that they had planned and invited others churches to, but were frustrated because other youth

more when they work together than they can alone. Recently, our own local Network of youth pastors brought in "The Seven Project" school assemblies, which featured a former Harlem Globetrotter and a professional skateboarder. Over 800

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leaders wouldn't bring their students. When we ignore the principle that "people support what they help create," there's no ownership, no sense of personal stake in the event, and no feeling of "I really need to be there."

However, it is true that God has blessed some youth ministries in our cities with more resources to bring in Christian artists, speakers, and conferences. What if those churches saw it as part of their ministry to be a blessing to the many other churches in their area? What if larger churches planned events by asking the smaller churches, "What would you like to see come to our area?"

In the book, *Primary Purpose*: "It also helps us realize that other people's successes are not a threat because as the water level (the Holy Spirit's activity in your city) increases in the region, our own ministries will increase as well. It's obviously a win-win situation."[3] The truth is, if we ignore the other youth leaders in our community, we deprive ourselves and our students of God's blessings, even if those blessings come through another church.

Cooperating with each other

A lot more is being done these days in the third quadrant, as churches cooperate with each other (bottom right). The National Network of Youth Ministries has over 750 youth ministry Networks listed on their web site (www.youthworkers.net). That's over 750 groups of youth leaders gathering on the local level for prayer, fellowship, and working together to reach students in their communities for Christ.

These youth Networks are demonstrating that churches can accomplish much

students came out for the evening outreach (unprecedented in this community) and over 600 students responded to the presentation of the gospel! We were totally unprepared for that!

An additional benefit of this outreach is that we have developed great relationships with the school administrators in our area. One of our local principals even mentioned our school assembly program from last year in his graduation address to the seniors.

The weakness of churches cooperating with each other, especially when they have a low level of relationship, is that the partnership lasts only as long as the event – resulting in a temporary impact on the community. *The Harvard Business Review on Managing People* points out another problem. When someone is high on shared strategy, but low on relationship, they are a mercenary: in it only for what they can get out it. The bottom line is that something more is needed, but clearly one of the dangers of ignoring the other youth leaders in your community is that you miss out on seeing God work in some really amazing ways.

Completing each other

The final quadrant (upper right) involves a high level of relationship *and* a high level of shared goals and objectives. This is the one I'm passionate to see happen in our communities. Imagine the churches in your community developing long-term relationships that acknowledge their fellow churches as needed, not optional, partners in fulfilling Christ's purposes in our communities.

Ed Silvoso says "When God looks at a city,

He doesn't see many churches. He sees one church in many congregations."[4] When you read the New Testament, churches are primarily identified by their city, such as the church of Ephesus, the church of Philippi, etc… There was **one** church in each of these cities.

> # These youth Networks are demonstrating that churches can accomplish much more when they work together than they can alone.

Every time I've heard messages on that great passage of Scripture which talks about the church being the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), I usually hear it talked about in terms of our local congregations. But doesn't that Scripture apply *beyond* our four walls to other churches in our local communities?

My church recently did Purpose Driven's *40 Days of Community*, the theme of which is "we're better together." I couldn't help but think: if it's true that the believers within a church are better together, isn't it just as true that the believers within a community are better together? I was really excited when I recently learned that there are churches doing the 40 Days campaigns together. In Charlestown, South Carolina, 30 churches are doing the campaign together, and in Orlando churches have made it a goal to have 10,000 host homes in their city. Now that excites me!

What if we began to identify other churches, not by denominational affiliation, or by worship style, but by the unique ways in which God uses them to reach our communities? I love the mission statement of the Mission America Coalition – *"The whole Church taking the whole Gospel to the whole Nation - and to the World."[5]*

What if we acknowledged that our individual churches cannot reach our entire communities alone? More than that, what if we realized that we can't be the church that God wants us to be without being connected with other churches around us?

Why don't the churches in our communities seek to complete each other? Just as in a marriage relationship, becoming one as the body of Christ is

extremely hard work. It takes a lot of time and effort, and it might even include fighting with each other. When it comes down to it, there's a big price to pay to see the church function as one. However, the result of youth leaders ignoring each other is the same as that of an amputated limb. It shrivels up and dies! There is life in being connected, not just to the head, but to the rest of the body!

Conclusion:

Looking again at the chart, a church could mark a spot in one of the four quadrants indicating where they see themselves, but I think we need to integrate the best of each quadrant in our attitude toward other churches.

I am suggesting that youth leaders need to move from competing with each other to completing each other, but I am also suggesting that completing each other must encompass all the rest – spurring each other on, blessing each other by communicating resources we can offer, and doing things together, and needing each other.

I would like to propose a revolution in youth ministry in which youth leaders:

• **Challenge each other to be better and better.**

• **Seek to be a blessing to other youth leaders in their communities.**

• **Accomplish more for God's kingdom together than we ever could alone.**

• **Experience the richness of completing each other as the whole and healthy body of Christ in our communities.**

And my prayer is that this kind of thinking would spread from our youth ministries into the rest of our churches.

[1] Harvard Business Review on Managing People (United States of America: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 3
[2] David Murrow, Why Men Hate Going to Church (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 18-21
[3] Ted Haggard, Primary Purpose (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1995), 81
[4] Message by Ed Silvoso, State College, Pennsylvania, April 1999
[5] Mission America web site (www.missionamerica.org)

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Membership Poll

Features of a website for *your* Local Network:

	not interested	somewhat interested	very interested
1. Blog (as in posting a news/topics that can be commented on)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
2. Local/Regional Event Calendar	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
3. National Event Calendar	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
4. Local/Regional Resouce Listing (think, a Youth Minstry Yellow Pages for your area)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
5. Place to post Local Network Meeting Times	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
6. Contact List (contact information for members of your Local Network as well as NNYM members in your area)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
7. National Youth Ministry Forum (where you can share ideas with other youth workers across the nation)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
8. Ability to customize the look of your Local Network page	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		
9. Local News Feed (from local news affiliates if available)	① ② ③ ④ ⑤		

We're looking at upgrading www.youthworkers.net in the near future, particularly improving the Local Network experience.

But we need your help!

If you had access to a website that catered specifically to youth ministry in your area, which of the features to the left would you be most interested in?

Either mail this short survey back to us at:
12335 World Trade Dr., Suite 16, San Diego, CA 92128
or you can take the survey online at:
www.youthworkers.net/poll

And if you have any other suggestions, please email them to Joel Sawyer at jsawyer@nnym.org.