

# Youth Ministry in America

Colleagues,

There were seven of us kids in my family, a farm family in northwestern Illinois, six brothers and one sister. The line began in 1930 and continued till #7 arrived in 1944—Ed, Mary Ann, Bob, Don, Ted, Art, Dave. Because of our Lutheran pastor's advice, Mom and Dad saw to it that we could go to college if we wanted to. Given the churchly realities of the day, that meant Valparaiso University. Five of us did. In the prior generation Grandpa and Grandma Schroeder had seen to it—doubtless also because of pastoral advice—that their two youngest daughters, my Aunt Marie and Aunt Martha, had begun the tradition and “gone to Valpo.” By now the number of our clan with VU degrees is twenty-something.

The five of us who went to Valpo all wound up as “church workers.” Our two brothers who chose to follow in dad's footsteps started farming right out of high school.

[You can guess which of the seven became millionaires. Though that isn't so astounding when you consider that a mere 250 acres of land, when it's now valued at \$4000 per acre, is already a million. Our dad paid \$35 per acre when he bought the “home place” in 1939. But as one farmer brother says: “So it's a million, but you can't eat dirt.” Ooops, I'm getting carried away by natal nostalgia. But there ARE stories there.]

Number five in the sibling lineup is Ted who offers this week's ThTh post. Ted got his Valpo B.A. in 1958, the first graduate in the brand new Youth Leadership Training Program that the university and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod had put together. After 15 years as a pioneer in that vocation, he paused to come to Concordia Seminary in 1973 to complete an

M.Div. degree. 'Course, that was the year that the roof blew off at Concordia Seminary and Seminex rose from the ruins. Even beyond that Ted's had an interesting ride. But let him tell you that himself as he reviews this book on youth ministry in the USA.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**WHEN GOD SHOWS UP, a History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,**  
**by Mark H. Senter III, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI. 2010**  
**384 pages. Paperback. \$26.99 [Amazon. \$19.70]**

A review by Ted Schroeder

Although I spent the first fifteen years of my church professional life serving as a parish youth director/minister (1958 to 1973), I had not thought much about the history of youth ministry or that there might be patterns or cycles which recur from time to time. I had while in grad school done research on the early Directors of Christian Education in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (then my home church), finding that I was more or less at the beginning of the second generation of that movement.

These early DCEs had been male parochial school teachers (and a few deaconesses) who were called by congregations which had no parochial schools to develop other venues for the faith education of the congregation's children. As they developed their skills, these DCEs expanded into programming for all members of the parish; and some became noted especially for

their creative youth ministries.

In WHEN GOD SHOWS UP Mark Senter says that the development of early Protestant youth ministry was prompted by the movement of young people out into the world of work, notably away from the home into the city. A generation or two later, it was the creation of public high schools which drew young people away from the home and out into the world. In both instances, the Church's response was to protect its youth by creating programs which encouraged faith and faithfulness in the face of peer pressures. Senter especially focuses on ministries which sought to create a spiritual environment in which conversion could be experienced.

The Sunday school movement arose in England and spread to the USA long before the development of public high schools. This was not Sunday school as most of us experienced it, but congregational efforts to reach out to young working people on their one free day (before the five day work week). In addition to providing wholesome social opportunities and encouraging faith and conversions, the Sunday School movement also promoted literacy among youth who were often educationally deficient.

Parish ministers and lay leaders who most successfully developed youth ministries soon found themselves sought out for basic HOW TO information. Senter notes that this often evolved into the development of print materials and the organizing of parachurch associations such as The American Sunday School Union, YMCA/YWCAs, the Society of Christian Endeavor, (and later) 4-H, Scouting, Campfire, (and still later) Young Life, Campus Life, Youth for Christ and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Senter does not give much attention to the youth ministries or to the youth auxiliaries of mainline Protestant denominations in spite of titling his book "a history of Protestant youth

ministry.” The Protestants on whom he focuses were (as before noted) seeking ‘born again’ experiences for those whom they target.....and promoting temperance.

Senter does make several observations which I found significant. Repeatedly he notes that most Protestant youth ministry focused and focuses almost exclusively on white middle or upper-middle class kids.

As he ends his book Senter acknowledges that he has said little or nothing about ministry in Black, Hispanic or Asian Protestant churches. Having spent nearly thirty years as pastor in a Black community, I had noted this omission and remembered with great admiration some of the Black church youth ministries I have witnessed. Frequently these are ministries which encourage youth to claim their special role of being in but not of the world, seeing that their history, their ethnic heritage brings special gifts to the world and the Church. Senter goes nowhere near such a vision or calling for Christian youth anywhere in this book.

Another of Senter’s observations is that youth ministries of the past have had significant impact on the ministry choices of 21st Century congregations-both for good and for ill. On the positive side, I have often reflected on the now sainted leaders of the national Walther League and the Luther Leagues in the ’50s and ’60s and my conviction that they led many a young Lutheran to become and to do much that I now admire in the ELCA . . . and some very significant persons who serve within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

But on the negative side, Senter is also spot on. Youth ministries which were mostly fun and games have also (sadly) affected the church of the 21st century.

The best part of Senter’s book is the last page, the epilogue, titled “So Where Do We Go from Here?” He asks ten questions

which everyone who is concerned about the life of the Christian congregation and passionate about youth will want to reflect upon deeply and prayerfully.

Here's a sample:

*"Youth ministry in America totally misses close to three-quarters of the adolescent population in America. How will Protestant youth ministry CHANGE to meet that challenge?"*

Note that word CHANGE. Senter began by noting that Protestant youth ministry has been almost exclusively about protecting ITS youth. But clearly, even that isn't happening.

Change should not mean imitating the world. But it does require major transformation, if we of the Christian Church are going to discover the meaning of the Gospel for that seventy-five percent we are MISSING. Surely that applies also to all ministries of the Church and the persons of all ages whom it hopes to reach.