

Para-Church Ministry vs. Church

Why Can't We Just Get Along?

Bill Crawford
The Dam Youth Drop-in

December, 2000

Eighteen year-old Taylor was a part of our community for about a year. He is a charismatic, people person. So it was not surprising to learn he was not only involved in white supremacist gangs working in the area, but that he was one of their major recruiters. He had a very violent lifestyle that also included crime, drugs and alcohol abuse. He describes a point of “weakness” – hunger and exhaustion - that made him go into The Dam for the first time.

In the drop-in, Brad, who is a large, black man (Isn't God funny?), approached him and introduced himself. Slowly and miraculously, they became friends. Taylor met Jesus through his relationship with Brad. Taylor started attending Bible studies and praying. The Dam became Taylor's faith community where he came to know Christ and learned about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He didn't always get it right, but those are other stories... He gave his testimony, a public confession of his faith, to over 120 ministry supporters, members of the Meadowvale community, parents and youth (including current gang members he recruited!) at our recent 5th Anniversary Dinner.

His former girlfriend and their newborn son also come to The Dam. She is involved in the teen moms' support group. Because of a restraining order, he was not allowed in the mall or in The Dam when they were there. After a number of indiscretions on his part, he was no longer allowed in the mall or at The Dam at all until the court case involving his son is resolved.

What happens to Taylor now? He has been cut off from his only sense of positive community and his only source of Christian fellowship. Taylor isn't comfortable going to church – he doesn't know anybody and they look at him funny. He wasn't able to make the transition from outreach ministry to a church home – and, unfortunately for Taylor, his time ran out.

This story and many others have forced us to consider the circumstances of many of our youth who make steps toward faith and then have nowhere to go after they leave the community of The Dam.

Introduction

How do we help youth make the leap from where they made their first steps of faith in an outreach ministry to developing a life-long faith commitment in a church community? Is that kind of transition possible or do other options need to be explored to provide for their long-term spiritual needs? The purpose of this paper is to begin to examine the issues without too quickly moving to potential solutions. My wife often comments that I like to “suggest” a response before even hearing the whole problem. Like me, our society doesn’t like to look at problems too closely, preferring to get to the solution and impose our answer on any given situation whether it works or not. I don’t want to make that mistake here. This issue is too important to be given a cursory treatment. This paper will try to draw out a number of the issues impacting this problem, develop the discussion further and bring more light to the many competing factors. Then, I will try to suggest a few possible steps toward a solution and the issues inherent to each.

Background Information on The Dam

The Dam is a community program for youth aged 13 to 19. All teens are welcome, free of charge, to come to the drop-in and participate in our programs, regardless of race, creed or colour. The drop-in provides a positive, healthy, Christian environment that is drug-free, alcohol-free and neutral turf. The Dam is a safe place where youth can hang out and get the help they need when they need it. The drop-in is named, "The Dam," because it is our hope that the drop-in is a dam that stops the flow of teens from becoming homeless street kids in the Downtown core of Toronto. It is our goal to be the friends of youth and a resource to help them stay at home, in school and in the community.

The Dam Youth Drop-in is a parachurch organization. We are a Christian ministry that reaches out to the “at-risk youth” of our community. Staff and volunteers seek to be the incarnational presence of Christ in the lives of youth as they develop friendships with them. We facilitate an authentic community for the broken, seeking youth of Mississauga. As a Christian ministry, I believe we are the Church standing in the gap between the area churches and the largely unchurched teens who find church inaccessible. The idea of church often never even enters their minds.

A Spiritual Wasteland

The youth we are working with who are unchurched, some for the third and fourth generation, have no concept of Church, Christian faith, spirituality or even the language to discuss basic concepts of religion. For many youth today, their parents never even got them “done” (baptized) when they were young because “it is the thing to do”, like it was for their parents. Fewer have a faithful grandparent, like I did, who give their grandchild a Bible which then becomes their first connection to the spiritual world.

There is an ever-widening gap between the church and the unchurched that will not be overcome easily. The best conversations we have on a spiritual level at The Dam, tend to be with Muslim and Hindi youth and even with a few girls who have been involved in Wicca because they all have a frame of reference, an understanding of the spiritual realm. They have a belief, even if it is an opposing belief, and so they are able and motivated to have discussions in that area.

Research from a recent in-house survey showed that there are more youth of other faiths in the drop-in who are practicing their faith than there are youth in the drop-in practicing the Christian faith. Youth of other faith backgrounds (many of whom are recent immigrants)

tend to have more of a current, relevant connection to their faith than those youth who indicated a Christian faith background. Far too many teens from our “post-Christian” culture have no idea what they are missing and, therefore, couldn’t care less.

Further research from the same informal survey recently completed by youth who come to The Dam confirmed that there is a gap between their Christian faith background and what youth actually believe today. Fifty-eight percent of the youth in the drop-in indicated having a family background in the Christian faith. Fifty-five percent of those youth indicated that they considered themselves practicing that faith as well. These numbers do sound somewhat encouraging on the surface. When pressed further, though, many of those youth revealed they referred to themselves as “Christians” more as a cultural indicator, much like being “Canadian”, as opposed to actually having an active belief system (i.e. believing in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord and going to church on a regular basis).

In fact, a number of respondents actually wrote “Canadian” or something similar when asked about their faith background. As well, 40% of those that did indicate a Christian faith background did not specifically mention a particular denomination such as Anglican, Pentecostal or Roman Catholic which may suggest a more cultural identification than a spiritual one. With all that considered, it is easy to see the gap that makes it difficult for Christians to connect with “post-Christian” teens or for them to somehow re-connect with their faith, let alone Church, on their own.

Developing a language of faith in our “post-Christian” youth is not the key to connecting teens to Church, relationships are. But, relationships with youth in a para-church ministry setting are rarely transferable to a church context. If these kids do come to faith in an outreach ministry outside of the church, there still isn’t an automatic connection developed between that

ministry in which they are developing their new faith and a church in the community. That church still feels as strange and foreign to them as it did before.

A connection with the churches is needed. But how is this possible when para-church organization believe the churches are neither relevant nor welcoming to their new converts and the churches don't properly recognize ministry outside of a church context. Para-church organizations like The Dam working in a community context are too Christian for the secular world and too secular for the Christian world. Where do we fit? Are we a social service agency? Are we a Christian ministry? Are we a church? Who are we?

We are because the Church isn't or the Church is because we are

In our on-going staff dialogue on whether or not The Dam is Church, a discussion with a colleague disturbed me. His concept of outreach ministry left the Church in the dust. If the Church is dead, he argued, why should we waste our energy dragging it along behind us. Let it go, it is holding us back. *We are because the Church isn't.* The Dam, as an outreach ministry to the community, exists because the Church is not doing its job to properly reach out to people in need either because it can't or won't. Either way, there is a huge gap that needs to be filled and The Dam is there to fill it. We are the Church, the church for today, the church that is relevant to the unchurched of our community!

While this may work as a great rallying cry for ministry, I am not ready to give up the Church for dead. I believe the Church and para-church need to work together. I believe, philosophically speaking, we are all the Church. The Dam does not exist because the Church is dying, but The Dam exists as the Church responding to the needs of the community. *The Church is because we are.*

Even the phrase commonly used to describe Christian ministry outside of a specific church context, para-church, indicates a connectedness to the Church. The word “para” comes from the Greek word, *Παρα*, which when translated means “from, originating from, beside, in the presence of and alongside of”. The various forms of the translation all point to a close relationship to the object to which it is referring. Outreach ministry comes from or out of Church. Outreach ministry originates from Church indicating a birthing of one from the other. Outreach ministry functions beside or alongside of Church. This speaks of common goals along a parallel path that the two share – a continued connection. Finally, outreach ministry does its thing in the presence of the Church, which implies a covering of the Church and the need for the outreach ministry to be accountable under the watchful gaze of the Church.

A discussion with a long-time mentor of mine helped me to better understand the need for both the Church and the para-church and, in fact, their need to work together to survive. The “*modality*” is the established, stable, rooted religious expression - the temple, the synagogue, the local parish or congregation. It is the basic unit of the Church and is by nature more inclusive, all embracing, less demanding. There is a minimum commitment to belong (race, baptism, membership, etc.) and a minimum responsibility (live for Christ, love God/others, etc.). It is from out of the modality that sodalities spring up from time to time.

The church as a “*sodality*” is that which represents the prophetic community, the apostolic band, the monastic order, the missionary society, IVCF and, in our case, The Dam, among many others. Its job is to “feed” the modality, to keep calling it back to its central mission and task. It is, by nature, exclusive, demands high commitment, has strict membership requirements, and is task-oriented, specific in its goals. It must see itself as a servant of the modality, never its replacement because if it does, it can lose its calling as a sodality. If it does,

the sodality becomes a modality and things get confused. For example, The Salvation Army - is it a church or missionary society? It is really the former, now, but lacking in things such as sacraments and a clear view of what the church is.

It is important to note that both the modality and the sodality together make up the Church. They work together to build up the Body of Christ, but they are different. This discussion speaks for the need of a distinction between the Church (the modality) which is home base and the para-church or outreach ministry (the sodality) which is the mission field. On a large scale, one story illustrates how the two need each other to survive and how one suffers without the other. In the 1800's, the Anglican Church in England was thriving and had active missionary societies whose specific purpose was to meet the needs of those outside the church and evangelize, both at home and abroad. This work not only filled the pews at home, but also helped the development of many Christian movements in other countries. Then a trend developed which stated that all Christians should be involved in evangelism, not just those in missionary societies. As a result, everybody thought that someone else was doing it so nobody did it. This was the end of missionary societies and the Church suffered a decline in attendance and overall health. The death groans of the Church can not be accounted for in just one historical example, but I do think it makes for a strong connection between Christian people going out and new converts coming in.

The Problem at The Dam

As a result of a Christ-centred focus on friendships and community over the years, youth at The Dam are making steps toward faith, but they have nowhere to go. The area churches, while some make an effort, are not youth-friendly, especially to the type of youth that don't fit the "good church kid" mold. Our youth that develop a beginning faith in an environment

that is welcoming and relevant to them find it difficult, if not impossible, to continue their discipleship in a local church setting that is foreign and alienating.

The majority of youth, who have gone to church with staff or volunteers, have not continued attending church on their own. At the same time, we hesitate to disciple youth to a certain point, knowing full well that there is no place for them to go.

Another “problem” we have at The Dam is that many of our volunteers prefer the drop-in community to their own church. Volunteers from area churches find The Dam is a more effective place of growth and nurturing for them personally than is their home church. The problem isn’t that volunteers find their ministry at The Dam to be life-giving and educational, it is that their churches are not. If this is true (and I have no reason to doubt our volunteers), then what does that mean for us and our efforts to transition youth of fledging faith to the area churches to be taught and grow in their faith? Why would we send new Christians to a place or places where experienced Christians are leaving because they are dissatisfied with their potential for spiritual growth?

One of the issues described by our volunteers in terms of their dissatisfaction with their home church relates to one already discussed earlier. The local church, as a modality, requires a lesser commitment and less responsibility from the regular church-goers. Obviously, many people are needed to do all that is necessary to keep the church functioning, but many in the congregation can do nothing and get away with it. Sometimes there isn’t a place that fits or isn’t room for someone who wants to be involved because there already is enough help. Whatever the reason, whether it is self-imposed or enforced from above, there are many in church who do not get involved and their faith development is stifled because of it. Some are

happy in their situation. Others are not and long for something more, so they begin look outside of their local church. The modality isn't enough.

The sodality requires a greater commitment and more responsibility from its members. This fits the profile of what it takes to be a volunteer at The Dam. Many volunteers in the drop-in have expressed a dramatic change in their own relationship with Christ after a time of volunteering with youth. They say that they have learned more about God in their short time in the drop-in than they ever did in church. Some go so far as saying that they get more spiritual benefit out of volunteering than the teens do by being in relationship with them! Is this a sad commentary on the church? It doesn't have to be. The modality and the sodality can work together for the benefit of both.

What is the difference between the person who passively sits on a pew in their church Sunday after Sunday and the person who is actively involved in ministry, either inside or outside of the church? Personal contact. Why do fundraising appeals tell heartbreaking stories about the people they are trying to help? It is an attempt to emotionally engage the potential donor through the story's personal connection in order to cause them to act. It is personal contact that encourages what I like to refer to as a "where the rubber hits the road" kind of faith. What caring Christians find in an outreach ministry is personal contact and a need for people in pain to understand the healing relationship of Christ that they have been "sitting on" at their church.

Faith in action is a faith that is being used. Just like weightlifting, as we exercise our faith, our muscles get stronger and more developed. Knowing how to lift weights or owning barbells is not enough, I should know – I keep my weight equipment packed away in the garage! We actually have to do it for it to make a difference in our lives. Having a saving

knowledge of Christ is essential, but it is only when we put our faith into action that we can truly experience its benefits for ourselves and others. As a result, our faith is alive and well and we are that much more equipped to be a mentor in the life of another.

Church vs. Para-Church

The church and the para-church can work together. The church grows its members to the point where they can be put in leadership in ministry in or out of the church. Those in the church continue to develop new leaders for ministry. Those in ministry outside the church reach out to the larger community and bring new converts to the church. It is their training in the church context and their personal connection in the ministry context that inspires them through the power of the Spirit to make a difference in the lives of others. New converts are brought to the church where they can be taught and nurtured in their faith until they too are ready to go out. In a perfect world this would be how the church and the para-church work together, but we do not live in a perfect world. In the worst case scenarios of our imperfect world, the church is not relevant to those in the pews let alone those outside its walls and outreach ministries are too fearful to let anyone they influence out of their grasp.

One local pastor has a vision that sees the church and the para-church working together no longer as two separate groups but as one. He asserts that the current broken model is like a balloon twisted in the middle. One side of the balloon is church and the other is a parachurch. The twist in the middle is a bruising bottleneck that prevents communication, partnership and the fulfillment of our calling as Christians. Because the balloon is twisted the church and the para-church are going off in different directions. Church has government with no ministry and the para-church has ministry with no government.

On the church side, this model produces frustrated potential leaders impatient to get out. It destroys the unity of the universal Church and creates torn departures. On the para-church side, this model produces experienced para-church ministry that finds it impossible to get back in to the church causing relational breakdowns and blocked arrivals.

This pastor asserts that even though it is the essence of our call to participate with God (2 Peter 1:4) in saving the lost and broken world from the bondage of this world, what would be the point of it all if what they are saved into is a worse bondage – even if it is a “religious” one! His vision is to see the Church functioning as it did in the Book of Acts (Acts 13 and 14). He believes that if we want to see New Testament results, we need to go back to New Testament patterns. This would ‘untwist’ the balloon and the church and para-church would then be able to work as one and in harmony all together. There would no longer be a need for a distinction between church and para-church.

I certainly share his concern about helping the lost out of one form of bondage only to become trapped in our own. I also believe something needs to be done to heal the broken relationships and generational mistrust of those who chose the inside of a building to minister in and those who chose the other side. I don’t think the answer is to do away with the distinction. Going back to New Testament patterns sounds good. The New Testament Church had ministry leaders like Peter and James who stayed home to “feed the flock” and also those like Paul and Barnabas who went out to seek “the lost sheep” and bring them into the flock. A modality and a sodality expressed even then, at the beginning of the Church.

The question is how did they work together? How did they see their relationships to one another. Did they value each other’s ministries? We know that Paul raised money from the Gentile churches on his missionary journeys for the Jerusalem church back home (2

Corinthians 9). We also know that Paul had difficulties being accepted as an apostle (Acts 9:26-30) and that his converts, likewise, were not completely welcome into the new Church (Acts 15). Sounds like the problems we are facing today are not new at all!

Difference between being Church and being a church

Another part of the discussion comes in at the point that we decide that we are the Church, doing the work of the Church in our community. The question then becomes, is that enough? Is it enough “to be” the Church and hope our lifestyle and modeling of the Christian faith rubs off on the youth? Or do we need to be more like a church and do a lot of the same things a church does? What is the difference between being Church and being a church? One little vowel is the difference on the page, but, philosophically, the difference is huge.

On “being Church”, the focus is on who we are and what we are about. Ministry that has its focus on being Church is part of the Church Universal that focuses first on Christ and is not bogged down by denominational variations and controversies. “Being Church” is about extending the community of the Body of Christ farther than the church walls to reach out and include those outside the church. “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them also.” – Matthew 18:12. The motivation for ministry is from the inside out. It is the difference Christ has made in lives that motivates action in the lives of others. Being Church is not just a time or place, it is a constant.

On “being a church”, the focus is more on what happens or how it happens. It is more about gathering in than about going out. Services on a Sunday morning can take prime and maybe even singular importance for the leaders and the members. How often do church leaders place so much importance on the services that ministry during the week suffers or is non-existent? How many times have we heard the phrase, “Sunday Christians”? Being a

church is being part of an institution no matter how formal or informal, and therefore, means having to follow the structure/programs at times over people/ministry.

<u>Being Church</u>	vs.	<u>Being a church</u>
Who we are		What we do
What we are about		How it happens
Focus out		Focus in
The One Church		One in competition with others
Motivation is from the inside out		Motivation is from the outside in
Emphasis is on the outside in		Emphasis is on the inside out
Outreach		Inreach
Lifestyle		Behaviour
State of mind and heart		Institutionalized
Focus is out in the world		Focus is in a building
Service		Services
Active participants		Passive participants

Possible Solutions

The question is do we work to change area churches to be more youth-friendly and accepting to our unchurched, seeking youth and their families or do we start our own church to respond to the specific needs of the community that is not being reached by any of the churches. The ambitious task of changing the mindset of the “people in the pew” is difficult at best and presumptuous at worst. The idea of starting or own church is scary and would put us in “competition” with the churches that presently support us. Maybe the answer is not one or the other, but both.

Transitioning youth from The Dam to a local church

We have seen some limited success in involving and connecting youth with local area churches through relationships with staff or volunteers. A youth develops a close connection with either a staff person or a volunteer. Their relationship grows and the staff begins to mentor the teen. At some point, the youth is ready and willing to experience the wider body of the

Church and begins attending along with the staff at his or her church. Sometimes the youth makes relationships with other people in the church and transference from the individual staff to the larger community takes place and the transition is successful. More often, though, the youth will only attend as long as the staff is willing to bring them and no further connection is made. Maybe this tends not to work because, like many of the volunteers themselves, the youth we are trying to transition like The Dam better than the church where we are trying to place them.

One fairly recent initiative, which has seen greater success, is involving the youth group leader from one church as a volunteer in a few of our drop-in programs each week. This has built a direct bridge from the youth at The Dam to the youth at this church. The youth group leader develops relationships with youth at The Dam and is able to personally invite them to the youth activities that he is leading at his church. He meets them at the drop-in, his relationship is the bridge and his involvement at the church ensures that they are welcomed and encouraged to become a part of what is going on. The personal connection and relationships of the youth group leader with everyone involved is key to the success of this method of transitioning youth.

In the long-term, we have experienced problems with this model as well. At one church a number of years ago where a similar situation was in place, too many youth from the drop-in started attending their youth group much to the chagrin of the original members, their parents and the church leaders. Some of the youth group kids went to the same school as the drop-in kids and would go to great lengths to avoid them at school and were definitely not interested in making friends with them at their church youth group. The parents were concerned about the negative influences the drop-in kids would be on their children and put pressure on the minister

and the youth leader to separate them. What started as a great idea and opportunity for ministry turned into a hotly divisive issue both inside and out of the youth group. I am hoping that our current situation will work out better than our previous experience.

Youth Church

Maybe we can't change the churches, the inaccessible styles of the services or the unwelcoming attitudes of a few vocal people, but maybe we can share our dilemma and develop in them an understanding of the problem and a vision for a response. The area churches then become part of the solution as opposed to part of the problem. Then we don't have to start our own church, but can "do church" as a ministry to unchurched youth and their families with the blessing and under the covering of the local area churches.

In the context of the models described by Mark Senter in his book, *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, which discusses basic and emerging models of youth ministry, what this paper discusses is the development of a "youth church" model out of the existing "safe place" model. The drop-in is the safe place where staff and volunteers, as caring, Christian adults, come alongside youth within a neutral setting and, through friendship and listening and caring first, earn the right to speak truth into their lives. Discipleship begins, but often at a very basic level because of the absence of background in biblical teaching.

The "youth church" model is described as the logical outcome of the ministry of a parachurch organization. As more and more youth are being discipled and the number of Bible studies increases, the need for an opportunity to gather everyone in the community together for fellowship and worship is greater. But the youth church must never become focused on a service and become ingrown, but continue to focus on discipleship, Bible study and outreach to the community from which the church has grown. One-on-one mentoring and discipling

through small cell groups should always be the focus. Infrequent youth services for all the mentoring and cell groups would provide opportunities for all the youth, including their families and other youth not yet in groups, to gather together in worship and praise and be in fellowship all together, which is all very important. Yet, a service (passive involvement) should never replace the one-on-one relationships and cell groups (active involvement) as the foundation and primary place of learning and development. Otherwise, we would fall into the same trap as many of the currently existing churches around us. We would lose our focus and our very reason for being.

Youth church needs to be transitional. It can't be the end point for a youth or his family, but a stepping stone as part of a larger journey. This is necessary to encourage the support of local churches and to ensure the vibrancy of the youth church. Transition may mean five months or five years, but the idea is to move on, at some point, to an "adult" church. The 3 L's of the transitional church are *learning, leading and leaving*. Basically, someone who goes to the youth church is in one of those three groups. You are either learning (developing your faith and understanding of your walk with Christ) or leading (bringing others to an understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ) or you are leaving (moving on to learn and lead in another setting as part of your life-long commitment to Christ). No room for spectators!

Youth church needs to be youth-focused. It can be open to and encourage involvement from the youth's families and other adults, but the focus must always remain on the target group. It also needs to be lifestyle and relationship-oriented as opposed to program or service-oriented especially if it is going to co-exist with a drop-in style ministry as its outreach component.

Elements of the safe place/youth church model – “The Dam Church”

Outreach – First contact occurs in the safe place, the drop-in program at The Dam, and connections between Christian adults and at-risk youth develop. Drop-in also becomes the “fun” place where new Christians can then bring their friends to become part of the community.

Discipleship – One-on-one mentoring relationships with staff or volunteers begin.

Bible Studies – Mentors come together with the youth they are discipling and their friends in cell groups that can meet at the drop-in or in homes in the community.

Community Service – Opportunities for cell groups to join together and do something in the community. Something like shovel snow in the winter, do a car wash in the summer, take part in the 30 hr Famine or volunteer to help at a community event.

Church – The monthly youth-focused, youth-led worship service designed for the unchurched called “The Gathering” creates an opportunity for everyone to come together for fellowship. Could involve sharing a meal together before or after the service.

Conclusion

As I examine the issues related to church and para-church, the only thing that I am sure of is that there are still many more problems regarding the relationship between the two than there are possible solutions. The things that divide the two are too numerous and varied for a simple solution and maybe even a universal one as well. While, I believe it is in the best interests of both ministry types to remain distinct, I do **not** believe it is in their best interests to work separately. My experience in ministry from the church perspective and involved in para-church organizations has provided me with many examples of the pain caused by lack of partnership and the mistrust built up by non-cooperation and, unfortunately, far too few examples of getting it right. We are called by God to work in the unity that Christ himself paid the ultimate sacrifice to make possible for us. Doing God’s will and receiving His blessing in ministry in full measure will only happen when churches and para-church organizations begin to work together in true partnership and solidarity. Not to overlap each other in ministry, but to trust the other enough to complement each other as we each seek to do God’s will as part of the Body of Christ. We should no longer be asking why, but devote ourselves to the answer of how we can work together effectively and positively.