

THE GODBEARING LIFE

By Luke Wagner

Our Car Talk this month features one of my favorite youth ministry books—The Godbearing Life by Kenda Creasy Dean & Ron Foster. If you haven't read it, put it on your list. This review of the book is by Hesston College student Luke Wagner.

Before I read this book I had mixed feelings. The title is puzzling, yet intriguing. It was just another book I had to read for class, and I had enough to do already. But I love youth, and I want as much information on ways to effectively lead and teach them as I can. The title, The Godbearing Life, made me wonder what I was getting into before I even opened the book. But I think the idea presented is marvelous.

Today when we think of the church and youth, we instantly think of a program called "youth ministry." But is that right? Dean and Foster make a point that as youth pastors today, we are tempted to, and often times become nothing but program directors. But youth ministry and being a youth pastor is not being a program director. Dean and Foster describe today's youth ministry and pastor creatively, yet accurately, when they say that we have turned youth ministry into a "McFaith", which is nothing more than a representation of a Disneyland-type approach to the ministry. It stems from our desire to be everything to everyone. Throughout this book, Dean and Foster offer a new idea of approaching youth ministry, or ministry with youth.

But first, let's look a little more at youth ministry in today's church. Dean and Foster introduce the idea that today's youth ministry is too often nothing more than a "one-eared Mickey Mouse". The adults in the church have simply abandoned their part in the lives of the youth, segregating them from "adult" activities and services. In the model, the face of the head represents the congregation while the one ear represents the youth ministry. They are separate, and it is an accurate representation of many churches throughout the country. The congregation needs to instead look at the ministry with youth as a "mission field," according to Dean and Foster, and I must agree. The problem, as Dean and Foster point out, is that in most congregations the word "mission" or "missionaries" often turns people off. But I agree with this view of adolescents and youth ministry as a mission field.

It is important for youth pastors to enter the field of youth ministry with proper knowledge of those they plan to minister with. Dean and Foster stress the importance of not adopting their culture, but instead we must inhabit it. We cannot allow ourselves to become one of them, but instead must be one with them. This is one of the greatest signs of being a healthy adult leader. It is also equally important to realize that youth ministry is more than just an 8-5 job or career. These youth need nurturing. Youth Ministry is not work, but a life work and life calling

Once we realize that we are missionaries, that we must be one with the youth, and that youth ministry is a life work, our task then becomes helping the congregation fix their view and see youth ministry as a real mission, and the youth as pastors and missionaries in their own right. When we make the concise decision to minister with youth, we are jumping on board with God, saying "Yes, I will participate in the development of these teenagers' holiness and not their wholesomeness." In other words, we are saying to God that we will help them take responsibility for their souls.

Our true identity lies in the person that God created us to be, according to Dean and Foster.

But what is a Godbearing life and what does it have to do with our true identity? Dean and Foster describe being a Godbearer as sneaking Jesus into this world by way of our own lives via the power of the Holy Spirit. Without a true identity from God, and a firm planting in Christ, I can't see how this can be possible. But Godbearing youth ministry is more than that. It is impossible ministry, but that's ok. That's because no other kind of ministry matters to youth. There is nothing that we will ever be able to do that can change a youth, or restore a youth's image of God. That is impossible ministry. And yet, it happens every day because of grace. It is only by this grace that we take the challenge of "being Christ" to youth.

Dean tells a story in the book, relating to how we should act as pastors, and more specifically pastors of youth. An eight-year-old friend of hers went running out the front door one morning to catch the bus, and his cocker spaniel Lucky went right after him. When Justin noticed that his puppy was outside, he started chasing it, trying to catch it, with no luck. It was not until Justin's grandmother stood on the porch calling Justin back into the house, that the puppy started chasing Justin right into the house. Dean points out that Justin's grandmother represents the pastor in the story. When we try to catch youth, they tend to turn and run, and some might think it's all a game, like the puppy. We need to be more like the grandmother, who stood on the steps of the porch, calling the youth back home. I think Dean says it best when she says that the point was not to catch Lucky but to get Lucky home, which first required Justin's return.

In the last section of the book, Dean and Foster first hit two things that go hand-in-hand. The idea of hand-holding and finger pointing are radical ideas, and ones that aren't practiced enough. Hand-holding is described by Dean and Foster as being the ministry of presence. I think back to when I was in high school, and how powerful the times of going out for a soda or burger with my youth pastor were. They are memories that I will never forget, and they were times that I often spilled my guts to the one that I trusted. That is what hand-holding is about—being there for the youth, one on one, listening and letting them speak what is on their heart and lending support. We are, in a sense, where the youth "tune into the voice of God," in Dean and Foster's words.

Another point that Dean and Foster hit upon is the focus on numbers. In today's youth ministry it seems that all we are concerned about is how many kids came on Wednesday night. The sad part of this is that in most cases it's the congregation or the church leadership board or some other board that wants figures and numbers. But the focus on numbers needs to be rejected to be a good Godbearer. The emphasis should be on spending time with the youth individually. Your simple presence can make all the difference to them. And this hand-holding offers much more to the youth, giving them the confidence in themselves, knowing that they are not all alone, but have someone beside them to help guide them along. Once the youth trust our presence, our finger pointing can have a significantly real impact in their lives.

Finger-pointing often times has negative associations: pointing out flaws, thoughts of guilt or blame. But the finger-pointing that Dean and Foster speak of is different. It is a pointing that is always in the direction of God, and more specifically the cross where Jesus hung and died for us. Just like everyone else, youth need someone to guide them in their faith journey. Dean and Foster use the example of a young thirteen-year-old who makes a first-time, personal commitment to follow Christ. You cannot just "leave him/her hanging"; the youth need someone who has been in their situations before, and knows the way through them.

Today's youth often give the impression that they do not care about much. But as Dean and Foster point out, research tells us that they do in fact care about things and each other, in most cases. Either way, it is our job as Godbearers to look for the potential hidden inside those youth who act as if they do not care about a thing in the world, as well as those who do. There is more though. After we find this potential inside of them, we must cultivate compassion. This does not happen overnight, but takes a whole lifetime, giving more reason to view youth ministry as a life work instead of a career.

Over the years, we as a society have become very global. We can travel halfway around the world in a day or two. We can turn on the TV and see more international news than local news. The cyber world is expanding rapidly. The internet has allowed youth to make friends through cyberspace. The fact is that they are growing up with a global consciousness. This can be a good thing. This "closeness" the youth sense in the world allows them to see the injustice in the world that earlier generations may not have felt as acutely. Our job as Godbearers then becomes to help the youth better understand and feel the connections. In turn, the youth can become advocates for those who are at a disadvantage as they become aware of the situations. But this is only the beginning, because just seeing the pain is not enough. It's when they feel the pain, they begin to understand more fully and act out in compassion that their faith will grow.

This new compassion is best learned and practiced in their own community though. This is where, according to Dean and Foster, the youth learn best the habits of compassionate living. Furthermore, our model of sensitivity and sincere caring as adult Godbearers further encourages the youth to do the same. And what better way to give the youth hands-on experience than letting them serve meals at a soup kitchen, or meet with those who cannot come to the church services. It is through these activities that the youth are able to express their compassion and in a sense be pastors, all in a local setting. Godbearers know that the best way for youth to learn is by experience, and thus should provide different ways and opportunities to participate in hands-on outreach.

Music has always played a big part in the lives of teenagers. Today's youth find it easy to express their feelings and emotions by song. Because of this connection youth have with music, it is hard to avoid the question of why we have not used it in ministry to reach youth. As Dean and Foster point out, the church's music is not the music of the youth, and I would have to agree with that strongly. Hymns and traditional church music are great, but not all youth today relate to it. According to Dean and Foster, because of this lack of connection with the church's choice of music, the youth are getting the message that our culture is alien, and we speak a foreign language.

This book by Dean and Foster covers many important factors pertaining to youth ministry. The biggest point of the book is being a Godbearer. But another point made that is equally, if not more important, is God's way of utilizing youth and God's feelings towards youth. We only have to look at Mary, a thirteen or fourteen-year-old girl who God chose to bring salvation to the world. God did not doubt her, and God does not doubt any other youth, so why should we? Our youth ministry needs to be one that imitates a womb, according to Dean and Foster. Today's youth are potential Godbearers, and they struggle with the news that God loves them more than their mind could ever imagine, and because of this unimaginable love, God is willing to die for them, and already has. We are charged as Godbearers to show them God's affirmation, and to bring them the invitation to become Godbearers, eventually taking Christ out to their culture.