

**The History of the Commission on Youth Ministry in the  
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod**

**By  
JOHN PARLOW**

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

**SENIOR CHURCH HISTORY  
PROF. WESTERHAUS  
APRIL 27, 1987**

## The History of the Commission on Youth Ministry in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

In the magazine *Rolling Stone*, David Breskin, writing specifically about the exceptionally high suicide rate among today's adolescents, wrote a sobering profile of the modern adolescent that accurately describes the brave new world of the Junior High and High School:

First off, chances are an adolescent's parents are divorced. Suicides come disproportionately from broken homes, and the increase in young suicides parallels the giddy divorce rate, now over 50% and the highest in the world. Married or divorced, the adolescent's mother works outside the home. She prides herself on how quickly she goes back to work after he/she is born. (That the father is absent or away at work is a given.) His parents subcontract responsibility for raising him/her to day-care surrogates, nurses, and sitters, and to Johnny himself.... There's no extended family around him, not with the geographic mobility for which Americans are famous. The moving is hard on him. He must keep readapting to new environments.

American parents spent less time with Johnny than any other parents in the world. While he is a teenager, they spent less than 14 minutes a week communicating with him. By the time Johnny graduates from high school, he'll have spent more time with his blue, flickering electronic parent than doing anything else but sleeping; he'll have seen 20,000 hours of TV, 350,000 commercials, about 18,000 killings. The family doesn't talk--they watch. On TV, problems resolve

themselves in 30-minute spans. It's his only problem-solving role model, and it's unrealistic.

That his life is not as exciting as the life on TV may come as a disappointment. His pain comes as a nasty shock, and he'll learn to escape rather than cope. He has far more access to booze, dope, pills, coke, than any previous generation of kids, and at an earlier age. He also has easy access to the genitals of the opposite sex, and the sooner he scores, the more difficulty he'll have with intimacy later on. Chances are increasing that he will be sexually or physically abused by a adult at an early age.

Competition is tremendous. If he is middle or upper-middle class, his parents have already told him he had better start running, and fast, because the pie is shrinking. The number of his peers has doubled in 20 years, but the opportunities haven't. There are only so many spots on the basketball team or in the law firm. He feels pressure to be perfect. This "cohort effect" means he lives in a downwardly mobile world. It's called, tendily, the end of childhood. Johnny quickly learns that good grades and other tangible achievements are the currency in which he trades for his parents' approval and concomitant permissiveness. The parents see the equation differently: They provide material well-being; he delivers good grades in return. His parents are permissive because it's easier to say yes than no. Besides, they don't know what rules are valid anymore. Everything in this world is negotiable now: Everything is shades of gray, and all that matters is green. They treat the kid like a little adult because they want him to be a little adult. They seek his friendship and fear his disapproval. When they give him too much freedom, he secretly desires rules; but they don't want to tell him about sex, about values, pain, problem solving, living with limitations. All is uncertain, nothing is shocking, everything is tolerated.

All told, Johnny lives in a bizarre warp of freedom and pressure at a stage of his life when neither is appropriate: when pressure makes him brittle and freedom's just another word for everything to lose. (Breskin, Nov.1984)

What is this brave new world adolescents live in? Is their world that much different from the past? How do you reach adolescents? How do you help high school students? Can the church make a difference to them? Can you possibly have an effect on this generation of teenagers? This paper will examine the WELS Commission on Youth Ministry and its service within our Synod.

The bulk of the information contained in this paper was obtained from a questionnaire which was sent to former and current members of the WELS Commission on Youth Ministry and from the minutes of the Committee on Youth Ministry. The CYM's cooperation is greatly appreciated.

### **History of the CYM**

The CYM was established in the summer of 1974 at the first WELS youth rally held in Ottawa, Canada. Before this date, summer 1974, there appears to have been no organized youth ministry that was overseen by the Synod. At that time, the CYM was officially referred to as the **Committee for WELS Youth** or **CWY**. The committee was elected by the youth leaders attending the Ottawa rally. The members of the committee were Pastor Paul Kelm, chairman; Prof. Allen Zahn, Ernest Saar, Ken Kritsch, Pastor David Schmeling, and Pastors Richard Stadler and Jim Behling were added in 1975. At its conception, the CWY was not funded by the Synod, rather the members of the committee sought finances from the groups who had attended the Ottawa and Winona rallies. In a meeting of the CWY on October 3, 1975, a motion was made, supported, and adopted that the treasurer contact the leaders of the Winona rally to find out if there were surplus

funds and what their intent was concerning such funds. Also, the motion was made, supported, and adopted that, if there were no funds forthcoming from the Winona rally, an appeal for funds be made to all groups who attended had the Ottawa and Winona rallies. The motion was made, supported, and adopted that Mr. E. Saar be authorized to draft such an appeal if it was necessary. The motion was made, supported, and adopted to send a copy of the treasurer's report to all the groups who attended the rallies. This motion was later rescinded.

Later in the October 3rd meeting, the members of the CWY discussed the possibility of meeting with the Board for Parish Education in the following February. The members of the CWY were to discuss areas which needed to be talked over with the BPE. Some the the areas of discussion were the following.

- 1) Ask the BPE to define its efforts in youth work over the past biennium so that the CWY would be able to tell if it was duplicating any of their efforts.
- 2) Find out what the BPE sees as its responsibility regarding youth work.
- 3) Get the BPE's reaction to the Articles of Federation.
- 4) Find out if the BPE is willing to offer any help toward organizing youth work in Synod and what kind of help it was willing to offer.
- 5) Discuss with the BPE a program for service opportunities and study helps.
- 6) Find out if the BPE is a clearing house for youth material. Are we trespassing if we assume the role of being a clearing house?

On February 9-10, 1976, there was a meeting of the CWY at the Synod building in Milwaukee. Representatives from the BPE were present at the meeting. The two committees discussed the importance of a unified effort for youth ministry in the Synod. The Rev. William Fischer, secretary of the

Synod's Board for Parish Education, outlined the role of the Synod's Board for Parish Education in various areas including youth ministry. He reported that present work being done by the BPE which was applicable to youth ministry included the publishing of Bible Class and study materials. It was reported that the BPE also gathered and published materials useful for youth ministry. Pastor Fischer pointed out that the BPE has had little to recommend because most materials published(at that time) by other organizations were not acceptable. Pastor Fischer explained that the BPE was not able to publish more materials of its own because of shortage of staff. On February 9, 1976, Pastor Paul Albrecht commented on the lack of instruction and services offered to WELS members who are in the "in-between" years. Pastor Albrecht pointed out that Christian education is an on-going thing, and yet, we as a Synod stop short when it comes to youth ministry. Pastor Albrecht stated that he felt it was the responsibility of the BPE to promote and educate WELS congregation in the area of youth ministry. He ended the letter with the encouraging statement,"Our District Board has not done too much in the past to meet this responsibility. But now we are working on it and by God's grace and guidance, we will continue to do so. It is our responsibility and should be a part of our activity."

In the April 1977 meeting of the BPE , the members of the BPE appointed the following six-man committee, as one of its standing committees, for youth ministry:

Pastor Paul Kelm, chairman, and Prof. Allen Zahn, three-year terms; Mr. Ernest Saar and Pastor Richard Stadler, two-year terms; Pastors John Lawrenz and James Behling, one-year terms.

The committee appointed by the Board for Parish Education to serve as the standing committee on youth ministry under the Board for Parish Education met in conjunction with the international youth rally held at New London. The meeting took place in New London, Wisconsin during July 12-14, 1977. At this meeting, the motion was made and passed that the standing committee on youth ministry be officially called Committee on Youth Ministry (CYM).

At the 1985 convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, a decision was made which granted commission status to Committee on Youth Ministry thus separating it from the BPE. The chief benefit in this change was the fact that each district in the WELS now elected a Youth Coordinator and appointed a committee to assist him. This new arrangement was to facilitate the efforts of promoting and coordinating youth ministry within our Synod.

### **Purpose and Goals of the CYM**

The Commission on Youth Ministry of the WELS has been directed by the Synod to encourage, promote, and coordinate ministry to the youth of the Wisconsin Synod. The following is the statement of purpose of the Commission on Youth Ministry.

The Commission on Youth Ministry will:

1. encourage, promote, and coordinate youth ministry in the Synod and

- serve as a resource to districts, conferences, congregations and homes;
2. gather, evaluate, produce, and make available materials for youth ministry in homes, local congregations, conferences, and districts of the Synod and shall oversee the exchange of ideas about youth ministry through newsletters to pastors, counselors, and youth of the Synod;
  3. sponsor training workshops and seminars which will equip youth counselors to work with youth; and
  4. advise groups planning for international or regional gatherings as requested.

To carry out its purpose, the CYM currently is:

1. Conducting an annual youth counselors' workshop for youth counselors;
2. Conducting an annual seminar with the middlers of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to prepare them for possible youth counselor responsibilities during their vicar year;
3. Seeking to conduct an annual seminar with the seniors of Dr. Martin Luther College to help prepare them for youth counselor responsibilities in their teaching ministries;
4. Making itself available for workshops and seminars on youth ministry in the districts;
5. Overseeing and subsidizing the publications YOUTHINK and Generations;
6. Making available youth counselor training tapes through the District Youth Coordinators;
7. Overseeing the production of a second song book;
8. Developing a youth counselor's handbook;
9. Preparing to conduct a needs assessment survey of youth, parents, and pastors within our Synod; and



10. Developing a network for youth ministry throughout Synod through the offices of the District Youth Coordinators and their committees.

To more effectively carry out its purpose, the Commission on Youth Ministry has determined that it should:

1. Train people in each of the districts to conduct workshops and seminars related to youth ministry;
2. Explore ways to increase the circulation and readership of YOUTHINK and Generations
3. Subsidize for the time being the costs to expand the staffs for Generations and YOUTHINK so that those publications might be published more frequently and with increased quality where necessary;
4. Seek ways to develop, finance, and produce more educational resource materials;
5. Do a better job of gathering and evaluating youth ministry related materials;
6. Develop a handbook for WELS International Youth Rally Organizing Committees to assist them in the planning of rallies;
7. Secure budget to meet annually with District Youth Coordinators; and
8. Secure budget so that the District Youth Coordinators are able to meet adequately with their district committees.

Currently, the members of the Commission on Youth Ministry are Prof. Allen Zahn, chairman; Mr. Dave Bunnow, Rev. Mark Freier, Mr. Doug Holiday, Prof. John Johnson, Rev. David Kriehn, Mr. Richard Schwartz, and Rev. William Fischer.

Assisting the members of the Commission on Youth Ministry, are a group of individuals known as District Youth Coordinators. These men also

assist the members of the CYM in encouraging and coordinating ministry to the youth of the Wisconsin Synod. The responsibilities of the District Youth Coordinator include the following:

1. To schedule regular meetings of the appointed District Youth Committee as deemed necessary to accomplish its task.
2. To keep "youth ministry" on the agenda of district meetings.
3. To report to the District Youth Coordinators of other districts what his district is doing in youth ministry.
4. To report to his District Youth Committee what other districts are doing to encourage, promote, and coordinate youth ministry as a stimulus to the committee to develop its own approach to youth ministry in the district.
5. To glean from the minutes of the Commission on Youth Ministry and from other sources sent to him information and suggestions which he can propose to the District Youth Committee relative to youth ministry.
6. To initiate ideas for youth ministry which the district could undertake to serve the youth of their district.
7. To urge all pastors in the district, through the appropriate channels, to share YOUTHINK and Generations and other youth related materials with their teachers, lay counselors, and youth.
8. To develop an awareness of competent youth counselors in his district who could be a resource for the Commission on Youth Ministry as writers for YOUTHINK and Generations trainers of other counselors or other aspects of youth ministry, song-writers, artists, photographers, sound technicians, or publicity personnel.
9. To promote the fall Youth Counselor's Workshop among the people of his district, or promote a district-wide training workshop for counselors within his district.
10. To secure a copy of the program materials for any rallies or major inter-congregational youth events which occur in the district as well as the names of the people organizing and executing the event, and to forward a copy of the material to the Commission on Youth Ministry chairman so that a

file of program resources can be maintained, and to forward the names so that an active file of resource people who have worked with area rallies can be maintained.

11. To submit to YOUTHINK and Generations youth ministry related articles and reports on youth ministry activities.

The following is a list of the District Youth Coordinators

Arizona-California District: Mr. Marion (Bob) Green  
Dakota-Montana District: Mr. David Neujahr  
Michigan District: Pastor Stephen Otto  
Minnesota District: Pastor Don Scheuerlein  
Nebraska District: Pastor David Russow  
North Atlantic District: Mr. Ernest Saar  
Northern Wisconsin District: Pastor Bruce McKenny  
Pacific Northwest District: Pastor Gary Kraklow  
South Atlantic District: Pastor Ross Ulrich(?)  
South Central District: Pastor Edwin Lehmann  
Southeastern Wisconsin District: Pastor Michael Turriff  
Western Wisconsin District: Pastor David Aderman

**Future Efforts of the CYM**

There is no doubt that there is a need to minister and serve the youth of our Synod. But how can this be done effectively? One must keep several things in mind. *First*, we have to stop making excuses. Are there churches so riddled with other responsibilities and liabilities that youth ministry is impossible? There might be, but often the cause of the problem is as much the obstinant attitude of the youth leadership as it is the impediments of the church itself. Discouragement engenders defeat. Gloom begets doom. No one said it would be easy to minister to adolescents. Sometimes you deal with the most unsuitable people in the strangest places in the most unorthodox manners. Yet, none of these "obstacles" are to great to overcome.

They can be and are overcome by people who care, who are trained, and who trust in the Lord's help and guidance in their ministry. Finally, it is he who gives the increase.

*Secondly*, in an effort to build a "successful" youth ministry, one must realize he can not do it alone, it takes a team effort. Solomon in the Proverbs reminds us of this truth, "Plans fail for a lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed." (Prov. 15:22) This "team effort" not only includes other called workers and lay people but specifically parents. It is becoming increasingly more apparent that youth ministry programs do more than minister to youth; they also minister to parents. Every youth worker must understand that youth ministry exists for a fourfold purpose, 1) for the glory and service of the Lord, 2) to strengthen the adolescents relationship with his/her Lord, 3) to minister to the adolescent's needs, and 4) to support and strengthen the family. We as a Synod must explore ways in which we can involve parents in youth ministry. We must strive to better communicate, cooperate, and educate the parents of the youth of our Synod if we are to minister to our youth effectively.

*Finally*, there must be a full-time staff devoted to youth ministry in the Wisconsin Synod. This suggestion has been voiced by several CYM members.

A full-time staff would be able to develop resources, coordinate efforts, and promote youth ministry throughout the churches in the WELS. This staff would be able to promote youth ministry at the synodical high schools and prep schools.

## **Conclusion**

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is literally the home for thousands of "Johnnys," adolescents who are caught up in the "second birth"-eight years of transition from the world of childhood to adulthood. Their journey is hindered by sin, Satan, and this narcissistic world. As Christians, we are to care for one another,-- spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Adolescents are under this umbrella of concern. As this paper has pointed out, the WELS Commission on Youth Ministry has faithfully ministered to our youth and will continue to do so with the Lord's help. May the Lord continue to bless our efforts as individuals and as a Synod as we minister to the youth of the Wisconsin Synod.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Breskin, David, "Dear Mom and Dad," Rolling Stone (November 1984).