

“Matt Overton’s personal and exceedingly helpful book will help faith communities re-imagine how to engage youth in a community of tenderness and kinship. The model presented here goes beyond the social enterprise concrete proposal and actively invites young people to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. Every church should have this book as a resource.”

**Father Gregory Boyle**, Founder of Homeboy Industries and Author of *Tattoos on the Heart*

“Creativity, innovation, and mentorship are some of my favorite things, and this book is about all three. Matt is raising the alarm about the unsustainable and ineffective youth ministry models of the past, while also casting vision for a way forward. This book will challenge you to examine the youth ministry models and norms you’ve inherited, and it’s going to inspire you to dream, create, and experiment too.”

**Elle Campbell**, Co-founder of Stuff You Can Use

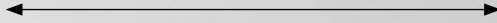
“It’s easy to critique models of youth ministry. It’s much harder to critique models of ministry and offer an alternative. Matt Overton does exactly that in this brilliant weaving together of narrative, missional entrepreneurship, and just all around sound advice. Matt provides thought-provoking challenges as he reimagines ministering with young people, allowing us to journey with him in exploring spiritual formation from a new angle.”

**Amanda Drury**, Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Indiana Wesleyan University and Director of the Imaginarium

“A wonderfully imaginative, insightful, and practical book! Matt Overton writes with passion and from experience, showing how a new vision of youth ministry focused on social enterprise can be both more faithful and more effective than many of our increasingly tired (and failing) models of youth ministry. You will be inspired and equipped in fresh ways by following Matt’s vision and his eminently practical suggestions!”

**L. Gregory Jones**, Dean of Duke Divinity School and Author of *Christian Social Innovation*

# Mentorship and Marketplace



A New Direction for Youth Ministry

By Matt Overton

Foreword by Kenda Creasy Dean and Mark DeVries



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**Anne:**

For all your patience and love on this kingdom journey that seems to have no clear destination.

**Clara and Magdalene:**

May the God of hope bless you with things that are worthy of laying your life down.

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*I'm a success today because I had a friend who believed in me  
and I didn't have the heart to let him down.  
– Abraham Lincoln*

I should have asked sooner.

Already retired when he made his way to our small congregation fifteen years ago, Al MacIlroy was a lanky paragon of forbearance, with twinkly eyes and a cheerful way of seeing problems as opportunities. He worked at True Value Hardware, adored the teenagers who make up most of the congregation, and forgave our young and inexperienced leaders.

Not quite eighty, he dutifully served on just about every church committee we had. He wanted to serve God in ways he felt he missed when he was younger. I (Kenda here) admired Al's joyful dedication, his gift for putting a sunny spin on the most mundane church business, and above all his unwavering devotion to the young adults in our congregation.

What I didn't know was that Al invented the inkjet printer.

I knew he had been at Hewlett-Packard in California back in the 1970s, but he didn't say he was one of those who had helped Silicon Valley become "a thing." He didn't tell me that he still mentored young entrepreneurs online, just for fun. He didn't tell me because I didn't ask.

It came out at breakfast, when our church needed a sustainable vehicle for mission and outreach. We took the "vehicle" part literally: We bought a food truck, and dug into the process of becoming the first food truck in our town. Safe to say none of us had a clue what we were doing.

In our small congregation of electricians, bus drivers, lab technicians, and students, Al was the only person with any corporate leadership experience. All we knew was that our tiny congregation of fifty people needed a way to do mission and outreach that would pay for itself—and so...a food truck. The ministry part was easy.



The business part nearly sank us.

The reason it got off the ground was Al. At breakfast one day, Al told me he had been meeting with Jess, the seminary intern who was leading the food truck ministry and had managed teams for Starbucks before graduate school. She had asked Al for desperately needed advice, and he willingly complied.

In that conversation at breakfast, I learned about Al's background in the tech industry. He knew, better than we could, the rapids we were entering as we dipped our toes into the American marketplace. He had been down this river many times in his forty-year career. He respected those rapids, but they did not intimidate him. So Al dusted off his old corporate hat and put it back on again—for his church.

And...Al came alive.

Mentoring Jess was the first time Al realized that the very gifts God had given him for success in the corporate world—the very things he loved to do so much that he shared those skills with up-and-coming entrepreneurs online—were gifts *God* needed, as well as Silicon Valley.

For most of his seventy-nine years, Al thought serving the church meant being on a committee. Suddenly the things Al had spent most of his life doing mattered to his faith, and not just his livelihood. His business experience was something he could leverage for God's work, as well as his own. When the food truck launched, Al stood beaming by the menu easel at nearly every event, sporting a yellow "Feed Truck" T-shirt and charming passersby as a one-man self-appointed welcoming committee. At his funeral last fall, the food truck served lunch, leaving his spot by the menu board vacant in his honor.

## Congregational Pioneers

It's been said that "lives of extraordinary innovation depend on lives of extraordinary support." The book you are about to read is Exhibit A of this principle. Matt Overton is an energetic pioneer in the growing Christian social innovation movement. Unlike the stories of

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most social entrepreneurs, however (including Christian ones), Matt's story resounds with the importance of a faith community in such endeavors, especially when young people's lives are at stake. This story could not have happened apart from a congregation.

Part memoir, part ministry self-help book, *Mentorship and Marketplace* is not a how-to manual, although plenty of sound advice lies within these pages. In some ways, it's more like a travelogue, the story of a youth pastor on a journey who took a left turn that brought about a completely fresh understanding of ministry, the church, and vocation. As we join him on this journey, Matt confides in us.

Like most youth pastors, he started to wonder if his church's (very successful) ministry with teenagers was making any difference. It seemed that it was really just addressing a homogenous group of families who, honestly, would have been in church anyway. Did the God offered in youth ministry really matter in these teenagers' daily lives? Were they prepared any better to live as Christian adults because they had been in youth ministry? And what about those other kids—the ones who don't come to church, or who have no use for faith generally? Wasn't youth ministry supposed to be for them, too?

This book tells the story of the transformation of Matt's ministry—and of the transformation of adults through that ministry, many of whom had, frankly, given up on the church delivering a faith that mattered in anybody's day-to-day life. Matt is the first to say that he could not do this ministry alone. He is also the first to say that there is no secret sauce for succeeding in an entrepreneurial ministry like The Columbia Future Forge; there is just common sense, hard work, and a willingness to do your homework, interpersonally as well as practically.

As Matt points out, faithfully mentoring teenagers—not jobs—is the heart and soul of The Columbia Future Forge's many ministries, though “job training and experience” is what most people associate with Matt's work. Indeed, one of the most refreshing things about this book is Matt's passionate investment in helping young people encounter Jesus, and his deep appreciation for the theological

dimensions of youth ministry.

Matt is not just innovating in youth ministry to make it shiny and new. For him, innovation is not merely a way to “save” youth ministry (or the church). The Columbia Future Forge emerged because Matt thought the church could do a better job of forming disciples by speaking into teenagers’ daily realities.

We think he’s right.

### Here Be Dragons

One of the things we admire about Matt’s ministry is his refusal to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Despite his concern, as he put it in one phone call, that “youth group just isn’t working anymore,” his commitment to a life-giving ministry with young people in his church has not flagged; branching out into Christian social innovation with young people was a way to strengthen the faith of young people already engaged in youth ministry, as well as a way to introduce faith to young people who have never been to church. Matt is still a youth pastor; his church still has a youth group and all the usual trappings of congregational youth ministry. Young people may participate in the church’s traditional youth ministries or one of the three social enterprises that have been launched through the church. They are very likely to meet God through the body of Christ in its most mundane forms.

Few things have been more common in the field of youth ministry over the last twenty years than experts saying, in one form or another, “It just isn’t working anymore.” And sometimes those words are true. Of course, whether youth ministry is supposed to “work” in the first place is an open question. A convincing case can be made that youth ministry is supposed to be about creating relationships with young people, not implementing a formula that “works” with them—whatever that means. When we complain that youth ministry isn’t “working,” what do we mean, exactly? Do we mean it isn’t attracting teenagers? It isn’t engaging them meaningfully? It isn’t growing their relationship with God? It isn’t getting them to church? Wondering

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whether youth ministry is “working” begs the question: What is youth ministry for in the first place?

Matt’s ministry is a reminder that youth ministry is not about something that works; it’s about engaging young people with holy friends and mentors whose friendship extends the body of Christ to include people we may or may not see on Sunday mornings. Youth ministry, at its best, “works” when teenagers do benefit, week in and week out, from the presence of durable, caring, non-exploitative adults of faith who take interest in their lives. Regardless of the form youth ministry takes, research tells us that the presence of such adults is arguably the most essential factor in faith formation. Often, old-school methods that “just don’t work anymore” with teenagers prove to be excellent vehicles for these relationships: Sunday school, youth group, small groups, mission trips, and retreats, etc. are imperfect but nonetheless reliable examples of what St. John of the Cross called the “frail instrumentality” of grace.

## Youth Ministry R&D

Don’t be fooled: The book you are reading is not, fundamentally, about what needs to go away in youth ministry as much as it is about what needs to be reconsidered, recalibrated, and reinvented. The truth is, it’s anybody’s guess how long the average church will be able to afford the kind of youth ministry that has been normal for the last fifty years. But just because we can’t afford program-based youth ministries, just because the numbers of young people present in the pews is dwindling, and just because shrinking congregational budgets have made the dedicated “youth pastor” position less common does not give us a pass on doing youth ministry. On the contrary: Fewer people in youth group does not mean there are any fewer young people who need Jesus. They just might not be in church.

This was the reality that Matt set out to address with *Mowtown*, and later, *The Columbia Future Forge*. Youth ministry has always been the “research and development” arm of the church, trying new ways to embody Christ, and new ways to faithfully mentor young people, that

may or may not fly with the larger congregation. Teenagers always loosen the bolts of their elders' imaginations—but today, as youth ministry faces an urgent need to go where young people are (which, often, is everywhere but the church building), we are seeing an era of bold experimentation taking hold.

What put Matt on our radar (in addition to the fact that Kenda had been one of his seminary professors) was that he attended one of Ministry Incubators' first hatchathons at Princeton Seminary. During that event, Matt fleshed out the contours of what would become Mowtown, the first social enterprise that Matt's church sponsored. We have been blown away, again and again, by the transformative, beyond-the-box thinking of Christian social innovators who attend these hatchathons. Like Matt, most of the folks we see (or who enroll in numerous other faith-based incubators that are now available) are a part of a wave of young Christian leaders who are willing to move beyond traditional youth ministry spaces in order to create sustainable ministries that speak to young people who, otherwise, would not be speaking to us. At the same time, they maintain strong connections to congregations, which often provide key support for their entrepreneurial instincts—and which, crucially, are filled with enormous, untapped talent that these ministry “start-ups” need. We've had the privilege of witnessing countless entrepreneurial youth ministries birthed in this process, such as:

- *Gastrochurch (Houston, TX)*  
A dinner church led by Rev. Meredith Mills that operates in Houston apartment complexes where countless young adults, recent transplants to the city, find community over great food and an optional communion service after each meal
- *The Brain Kitchen (Marion, IN)*  
A faith-based after-school program that combines tutoring, learning support, and cooking classes for children in a food insecure neighborhood, pairing college students with children who make a pot of soup and homemade bread to take home to their families each Friday (Amanda Drury, founder)

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- *Go Fish (Pullman, WA)*  
A summer fishing ministry where Rev. Matt McNelly teaches middle high students ecologically responsible practices, fishing skills, and Bible stories while pulling pike minnow out of the Columbia River to save the salmon hatcheries (the Fish and Game Commission pays youth \$5 per pike minnow)
- *Wonderspace (Marion, IN)*  
A warehouse-turned-playground and maker-space for underserved children in a part of the city where playing outdoors is cold and unsafe (Stephanie Freemyer, youth leader)
- *Try Pie (Cedar Falls, IA)*  
A pie bakery started with teenagers from multiple racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, in an effort to overcome racial divides and teach faith/life skills to teenage girls (Megan Tensen, youth leader)
- *Casting Hope (Goshen, IN)*  
A worm farm staffed by teenagers who wish to restore depleted soil in their rural county, while learning job/life skills alongside youth pastor/worm farmer Daniel Yoder

## A New Season

There's something different about this season of youth ministry. Call it desperation, call it necessity-as-the-mother-of-invention, call it the best opportunity the church has had in a century to be who God has called us to be—whatever the cause, more churches are saying yes to innovation than ever before. For some, a looming financial cliff challenges them to “change or die.” Others just long to connect with creative young people who have given up on congregations as places where creativity thrives. Still others long to authentically engage with their surrounding community in ways that are immediate and relevant to young people's lives. None of the innovations we have worked with “work” as youth ministries, in the narrow sense. But all of these ministries leverage the gifts of adults and teenagers alike,

forging human connections through which God moves into the neighborhood, as the church invests in the daily lives—and not just the Sunday faith—of teenagers. And in so doing, both youth and adults are changed.

Welcome to the story of one of them.

*Kenda Creasy Dean and Mark DeVries  
Co-founders, Ministry Incubators*

*February 2, 2019*





## Introduction



A few years ago I accidentally stumbled into a new way of doing youth ministry. It didn't spring forth because of anything exceptional I was doing, but through a confluence of events that came together, or were brought together, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

I began working in youth ministry about two decades ago as a nineteen-year-old college student, after I was invited by a workout buddy to interview for a position at his father's little church in Morro Bay, California. I took the job. It was a ton of responsibility and looking back I am shocked that they allowed me so much room to lead and, at times, fail. Ever since that first youth ministry job I have been learning, and struggling to figure out what it means to be a youth pastor.

One of the things I realized very quickly is that in youth ministry, there is always somebody with the next great ministry model that is supposed to work in your localized context. Usually that model comes from some huge church somewhere. I learned that what people peddled as successful, though, was often not the right fit for my church. I was also smart enough to know that demographics often shaped "success" more than the Spirit did—unless, of course, you believe it must be God's will that successful youth ministries seem to almost exclusively spring forth from rapidly expanding white suburbs.

## Mentorship and Marketplace

As teen culture began to shift dramatically in the late '90s and early 2000s, I also learned that much of what was sold as “new” in youth ministry was often just the same old stuff, repackaged. All groups have a tendency to do the same things over and over—just with more and more resources. This propensity for technical change, rather than truly adapting to new realities, is the killer of good organizations and communities. If you don't believe me, check out any youth ministry hashtag on Twitter. It's often a laundry list of “new ideas” for youth work. Mostly, though, these “new ideas” are actually the same old youth ministry techniques, now applied to a new set of cultural shifts.

As time went on, I increasingly found myself longing for a new youth ministry experiment, one that was truly different. I felt a growing sense that if I wasn't willing to risk failure by piloting something new for the sake of Christ, then I needed to hang it up. Though I read numerous books from about 2004 on that recognized the need for something “new” in youth ministry as we ran into the millennial generation, the books never seemed to live up to their promises or potential. Their early chapters would seem to capture the problems churches were facing, but when it came to application they got lost in a fog of speculation, rather than engaging in on-the-ground experimentation and action. Either that, or they would leave things to “your context”—which always felt like a cop-out that spared the author the rigorous task of actual ideation or real-life experimentation. I wanted somebody who wasn't on a speaking tour or doing research for an institution to get in the trenches and risk something. I wanted to hear from someone who was actually “in the arena” (to borrow a term from Teddy Roosevelt).

After arriving at a new church in 2009 and investing there for a few years, the nagging sense that youth ministry didn't work anymore began to give me an idea. What follows is an attempt to describe my journey into that new idea for engaging teenagers, both those inside and outside the church. I'll start by sharing a bit about the youth ministry model I am still developing, followed by taking a look at what I see as holes in youth ministry today. From there I will share why I think innovation is possible and why a social enterprise-based model of ministry might be particularly helpful going forward. Last, the appendix focuses on steps to help you and your church carefully

consider how you might develop a similar model in your own context.

I have a humble hope that what is laid out here is not simply a model that adapts to our culture and allows us to retain more teenagers. This book is about experimentation, innovation, and social enterprise, rather than retention. It's about a new way of allowing the transformative work of Jesus to take place in the lives and hearts of the teens in our communities, and in the adults trying to minister to them. I am so unconcerned with numbers that I want to say that this way of doing ministry might actually reach fewer teenagers than your normal model. But, I think it will do ministry with greater faithfulness. Though I am not a theologian by any stretch, I do always try to ask, "What does the way we are doing ministry actually reveal about what we believe about God?" I have done my best to be theologically reflective as I have gone about this work, and I will try to share that in a way that is easy to understand.

You will notice that, particularly in the first section of the book, I use an abundance of nautical imagery. I grew up near the sea, and I find that it is a wonderful metaphor for this season in the North American church. I hope this oceanic platform of images works for you in some way. We need to find ways to sail on new waters with a new course of direction if we are going to do effective ministry with teenagers. If, like the ancient Hebrews, the water represents a kind of terror for you, I am sorry. I challenge you to throw on a flotation device and sail on any way you can!

One particular image that has guided me is the Scandinavian cargo ship called the *Vindskip*. One morning while writing on my blog about my experimental youth ministry, I stumbled across an article about a new kind of cargo ship, which combines new and old ideas about sailing.<sup>1</sup> Most cargo ships exclusively use fuel for power, and waste tons of it by sailing against the wind and ocean currents. The designers of the *Vindskip* plan to conserve fuel by incorporating a hull that allows the ship to use the winds at sea, essentially using the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Shadbolt, "Vindskip' cargo ship uses its hull as a giant sail," *CNN.com*, January 16, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/16/tech/vindskip-wind-powered-container-ship/index.html>.

ship's sides as sails. Those working on it estimate that this "new meets old" design will reduce the fossil fuel output by about sixty to eighty percent.

After reading the article and watching some videos about the new ship, I knew it was the perfect image for the work I had embarked on. What I and others like me are trying to do is stop wasting energy fighting *against* the new realities in teen culture, or against the old models that are dragging on us. What we need is a new design that doesn't entirely bow to the headwinds of current culture by compromising our core theologies, and yet doesn't try to sail entirely against them. I hope my youth ministry represents a healthy compromise between gospel ideals, present realities, and pragmatic ways to move forward. You get to be the judge.

I also hope this book is a helpful picture of *one* experimental way of doing youth ministry. All the usual elements are here: prayer, worship, friendship, play, Scripture, shared meals, and intergenerational disciple-making. And Jesus, I hope, is at the center of it all. I have done my best to be honest in these pages about this model's strengths, weaknesses, and potential. Some of you might finish this book and go launch a social enterprise-based wing of your youth ministry. Some of you might innovate in some other way or tweak your existing models. Regardless of what forms, I hope the practical and theological concepts here are helpful to you.

Undertaking this great experiment has led to one of the most life-giving chapters of ministry I have experienced. It is also the hardest I have worked in my life—ever. Every ounce of blood, sweat, and tears has been worth it. I have never felt more alive than when I walked away from what I knew into what I felt was the right way to go about doing youth work. This model has flaws. I know them well. But, I do think that it might present you with a possible new course forward, and I hope it brings you the same joy it has brought to me.

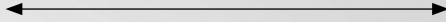
A few months back I was visiting with an influential pastor in the United Kingdom, who has built what is probably the largest youth ministry in the world. As we discussed church ministry he opened up. "You know, Matt," he said, "I have been to the United States so

many times and met with so many emergent people, progressive people, conservative people, and so-called successful church leaders. I have drunk more beer with trendy pastors in the U.S. than I ever have in the U.K.! But, I can't tell you how disappointed I am every time, because for all their talk, all their 'right answers' and 'right theology,' they have little to show for it. They have hardly taken any real action. They haven't really risked and built much of anything. That has been disappointing."

These words resonated with me. It's time for the American church to stop theorizing and critiquing. It's time for us to have the guts to start wading into ministry experiments and launching ideas that are as audacious as the self-sending God who was and is in our midst. It's no longer time for answers, but for inventions. It's time for us to innovate rapidly. I hope this book inspires you to do just that kind of work. Christ is worth it. The kingdom is worth it. And your soul will come alive if you do. That much I can promise.



SECTION 1:  
The Lay of the Land



## Mentorship and Marketplace

In the year 1588, the Spanish Empire that had dominated global politics and whole people groups was brought to its knees by a younger and more nimble fleet of English warships. Tensions between Spain and England had been growing for some time, and England was just emerging as a new power. In an effort to maintain a stranglehold on what they had, the Spanish created one of the most massive fleets ever seen in human history. It consisted of 130 ships, designed to protect an army intended to invade and conquer England. We know it as the Spanish Armada, but in Spanish it was called the *Grande y Felicísima Armada*, which literally means “Great and Most Fortunate Navy.” The ships were huge and had hundreds of guns each. The Spanish were sure they would dominate any battle they entered into. After all, they had dominated the seas for well over a hundred years.

What they could not have anticipated, of course, was that the English would utilize a smaller, more nimble fleet, and deploy fire ships to attack them. These unexpected tactics, along with some terrible weather, conspired to destroy a large portion of the Spanish fleet, which ultimately had to limp home to port. Though they did not know it at the time, the Spanish Empire was already declining in power and influence.

This is a pretty good metaphor for what I have seen in the church over the past nineteen years of ministry. When I started in youth ministry in 1999, everyone had the answers. There were all sorts of active models, and there was a general feeling that we were winning youth for Jesus left and right.<sup>2</sup> Ministries were expanding and all you needed to do was put the right techniques in place and things would go well at your local church. Most of these models were geared toward churches much larger than the ones where I worked, and it was often frustrating to try implementing them, but from the outside, at least, they seemed to work. But by the mid-2000s, just a few short years later, everything in the youth ministry world seemed to have changed.

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<sup>2</sup> By “models” I mean things like small group-driven youth ministry, exclusively youth-centered worship services, ministries centered around the Christian music scene, camp-based ministry, and of course purpose-driven youth ministry. The point was that if you just did what they did, you would end up as big as they were.