

Young Life draws fire over new ministry guidelines: A narrower method of gospel presentation

by [John Dart](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

New “nonnegotiable” guidelines for evangelism at Young Life ministries has led to the closing of a North Carolina office of the group and the claim by a national expert on youth and religion that the organization is moving in a fundamentalist and authoritarian direction.

Young Life, based in Colorado Springs, has had significant achievements as an evangelical ministry that took a “big-tent, pragmatic approach,” said sociologist Christian Smith of Notre Dame, who directs the ongoing National Study of Youth and Religion.

But Young Life is now requiring a narrower method of gospel presentation on the part of its 3,200 staff and 27,000 volunteers in the U.S. and 50 other countries, Smith wrote in an e-mail that complained of “autocratic foolishness” by Young Life officials. Aside from giving an introductory talk to kids about Jesus from a gospel account, ministry leaders are directed to focus on “sin, judgment, wrath and separation from God” before any talk about grace, love and forgiveness, Smith contends.

It appears, he said, that anyone who cannot completely endorse the eight-page statement on guidelines must leave the organization, and he cited the dismissals in North Carolina. Smith taught for years at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill before going to Notre Dame in the fall of 2006. He has published books and articles on how youths approach religion.

In November, all ten Young Life staffers in the Durham area of North Carolina either resigned or were fired for their partial dissent, and the 32-member local committee resigned en masse, said the group’s leader, Jeff McSwain. He and colleagues made a pre-Christmas appeal for contributions to start a new group, Realities Ministries,

using the old program.

The dissent came as Young Life prepared for its every-fourth-year international conference, held January 8-12 in Orlando, Florida, with some 4,000 participants expected.

Young Life posted a statement December 11 on its Web site, saying that its method of gospel proclamation “has been widely applauded within the mission” and that only “a small fraction of staff” have felt otherwise, according to Terry Swenson, vice president of communications.

“We start with love in our proclamation of the gospel,” declares the statement. “Young Life reaches out to adolescents in friendship, loving them where they are and as they are. It is in this context of grace that we talk about the truth of sin that separates us from relationship with our Creator.”

In a theologically detailed critique dated December 12, Smith said that Young Life’s directive boils down to “repent and then you will be saved.” That is reversing the sequence and logic of much Christian theology, including that of Augustine and Calvin, said Smith. Douglas Campbell, assistant professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, contributed to and endorsed the critique.

“We repent because God has loved us and saved us—not the other way around,” Smith wrote. “Our repentance and faith per se add nothing to our salvation; they are mere responses accepting an already established, divinely accomplished fact of redemption.” In other words, he wrote, God has provided nearly everything for our salvation. But under the Young Life interpretation, he said, “God’s work remains ineffective until humans contribute their own last part of the transaction by ‘making a decision’ and having faith.”

Campbell, who was on the local committee for the Durham area office, said in an interview that the new approach reminded him of the “Four Spiritual Laws” used by Campus Crusade. “Young Life is relatively amateurish—it does not employ a lot of seminary-trained people,” Campbell said.

Both critics questioned the need for greater conformity. “Why take a thriving ministry and crush it?” Campbell asked. Some teenagers understand reality in nonlinear ways and “cookie-cutter systems” elude others, Smith said.

Young Life, founded in 1941 in Texas, is led by Dennis Ryberg, who became the organization's fifth president in 1993. Ryberg has served on church staffs in Seattle and San Diego. He is former editor of the *Wittenburg Door*, an evangelical-oriented humor magazine. He also worked with Youth Specialties ministry.

Young Life, a longtime member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, had nearly \$213 million in revenues in 2006-2007. Last month it was named for the third consecutive year as one of the top 30 Christian organizations in the country for its financial self-disclosure and accountability by MinistryWatch.com.

The "nonnegotiable" directive, according to a copy obtained by the Century, was written "by the senior leadership," though no person is named. Its introduction states that the document's intent "is not to squelch the creativity of our staff, but to provide a foundation" for expression. "However, these are not suggestions," the authors add.

One section of the directive, perhaps with Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* in mind, argues that video presentations often play on emotions, leading viewers to "feel sorry for Jesus" or be emotionally manipulated. "We maintain that even in his crucifixion, Jesus was in control of every moment."

Staff instructors are told to stick to the crucifixion narrative in the four Gospels. "The awful reality of the crucifixion's brutality may be presented," the document says, "but only to communicate the seriousness of our sin and the extent of God's love."