Was Pioneer Girls Inevitable?

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How is it that a girls' club program such as Pioneer Girls could be in existence?

Perhaps you are thinking that I am about to give you a detailed history of the organization. This would answer the question, on the surface. But I would like to probe more deeply. What is it in our society—our times, our Christian history—that makes Pioneer Girls a possibility, or even an inevitability?

Certainly, we find no traces of such a movement in the Bible—at least, not in an organized form. So if we seek to justify our existence in literal Biblical terms, we shall flounder in the attempt. There was no Pioneer Girls group in the New Testament church!

Some would like to set the clock back—to return to the simplicity and vitality of the first century church, to strip ourselves of organization, of promotion, of planned programs—all the trappings of the modern "institutional church." Of course, the assumption that simplicity and vitality are necessarily linked is false, as is the assumption that the first century church was simple in its organization and program. Consider the complex problems treated in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Nevertheless, the idea of returning to a simpler life recurs among us in many areas of life, such as the much-talked-of "return to the woods" and the re-establishment of the close-knit family unit.

The fact is, of course, that it is impossible to go back. A complex society produces a complex pattern in human relationships, and therefore, in organizations—including the Christian church. Evan Adams, in his Friday lecture, helped us to see more clearly what has made our society complex. He discussed the gradual change from rural areas to urban centers. This helps us to better understand why certain developments in the church today may be considered inevitable.

Let us summarize some of the changes he touched upon:

1. The change in family life.

The tribal pattern, as he described it, whether that tribe be in Africa or an early New England village, was for close-knit families, often for the sake of survival, and for strongly patterned relationships between various members so that there was a certain expected behavior for every occasion and contact rather rigidly enforced.

Now, by contrast, modern families are more loosely structured. Relationships are far more casual. We are not all needed to contribute to the work of the family. Father is the breadwinner, and these days, mother doesn't even have to bake it.

2. The change in occupations.

One of the biggest reasons for the change in the family is the switch from agriculture to industry. Instead of being isolated into individual family units, each growing their own food supply and doing their own work, men were organized into work groups with others to whom they had no personal relationships. The overseer was not father; he was "the boss."

There is another contrast here. On the farm, the family was responsible for the entire process of food production, whereas industrialization often fragmented the work of man into a series of monotonous processes, so that work lacked its meaning.

What it the effect of this "facelessness", this anonymity? The city dweller feels less moral restraint because those who live in his community are detached from responsibility for him. A person in the city is judged on the basis of what he does, and treated accordingly, rather than on his belonging to one's kin group. Thus we patronize a bakery on the basis of its excellent pastries; we obey the man in the blue uniform because of his role as policeman; as children, we learn to respect all school teachers, not just those related to us. The slang expression, "You can be replaced," is never more true than in the city where a man fills a slot in the working order, rather than being valued for his person.

What is the significance of all this for us and for the question raised as the topic of this lecture? Simply this:

Young people growing up in modern industrial society (or a society in the process of transition, perhaps) are going to look outside their families for some of the help they need in growing up as full-fledged adult members of society. In the first place, no longer can the family adequately prepare them for the adulthood in all its phases, e.g. for their special careers.

Since a child is not expected to follow necessarily the career of his father, he cannot learn the needed skills and knowledge at home, and even if he could, the professional demands for academic degree and certification would not be met.

And so the school has become one of the most important agencies outside the home to which a young person looks for help in attaining adulthood. Not only is a general elementary and secondary education compulsory, but increasingly, young people are feeling the need for further specialized education —first in a liberal arts college or university, and then often in graduate school— medicine, engineering, law, theology.

But the school cannot solve the entire problem of the socialization of the young. Even the school is somewhat impersonal and perhaps necessarily so in order to train the young to get along in a society where what you can do is more important than the essential person you are.

The need to belong to a group is accentuated when one can no longer find continuing identity within the family unit. In simple terms, being accepted by one's family is not enough in our society: thus the establishment of groups outside the family which can supply the same kind of emotional gratification. We call these "voluntary associations."

What kinds of groups might these be? There seems to be a natural division of people by age in almost every culture. Today there are still many African tribes which continue a fairly well-defined age-grade system although the move to urban centers tends to weaken it. Under such a system, all of the children of similar age in a village are "initiated" together into an age-grade group. They move through a series of age-grade groups as they grow older. Each age group has certain defined functions and roles in the community. For example, one age group becomes the "elders"—ruling council. Another becomes the "warrior" younger men active in hunting and protecting the tribe.

Initiation is the crucial point. It occurs close to puberty and the first age set can be compared to the phenomenon we call adolescence, although there are important differences worth noting. Let us examine this more closely.

The initiation ceremony is rather violent in nature, in many cases—a sharp contrast to the rather permissive early training. Overnight, a young boy becomes a man. He is taught how to behave as a man, he is treated as a man, and he is given adult privileges and responsibilities. The physical act of circumcision and accompanying rituals make it an event indelibly etched on his mind. When he returns to the village from the initiation camp, he is not the same boy who went.

Moreover, the training of a boy in the duties of manhood was given by men in the village—not his own parents, or even close relatives. These were men who lived nearby and who thus had a relationship to him, though it can in no way be compared to the kind of man-to-boy relationship we sometimes idealize today in our culture. The roles of men and boys were far more distinctly defined and the idea of being a pal to a boy not developed.

In such a way have such societies determined the nature of the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Regardless of what we may think about the values or dangers of initiation, it is important to note that our own society has problems with the way it has decided to treat the transitional period known as adolescence. There is no drastic overnight transition; adolescence is a period of time—as long as ten to

twelve years. Therefore these years become a time for establishing one's identity—as a person, distinct from one's family and as a young man or young woman, distinct from the opposite sex.

Our society has no counterpart to the African village initiation rites. We give lip service to the ideal that parents are responsible for general training in the roles of men and women for sex education; but we proceed in practical action to establish links with other adults—in school. church, and community—to insure the successful socialization of young people.

This leads us back to a discussion of the place of agencies outside the family. We mentioned the school, and now we can see even more clearly how it helps to satisfy what seems to be a nearly universal tendency toward grouping by age. It also provides us with other adults outside the home to train children and young people in adult roles.

And what of the church? If the church were only a family worship experience on Sunday, its value would primarily be that of expressing the corporate unity of the Body of Christ. Today it seems to have a more complex function. When we consider it in its modern context as an institution, we see it reaching out for more of a person's life and commitment. The Sunday school, for example, is a kind of extension of the secular school, with religion as its only subject. The pattern is similar; the influence should be.

In all of this and even, unfortunately, in the church, there is a lack of the personal—a factor dominant in society when the family was focal. How different life must have been when a person moved only among people who knew him intimately and with whom he had personal relationships in many phases of life. He ate, slept, worked, played and traded with the same people.

Now we move about from place to place. Our only personal life is in the family—and even this has broken down with father away at work ten hours a day, and school dominating a large proportion of children's time.

So we are hungry for the personal—the intimate. We long for relationship, to belong.

Since our society pushes us early from our families, we feel a little guilty if we are too attached to them, with one exception—our spouse. And as a result, the husband-wife relationship has become the focus of all our concentrated heart-hunger and emotional need, possibly out of proportion.

Thus we are driven early in life, to seek gratification for these deep affectional needs outside the family. And if you review the argument I have outlined, you will see that in our society, these needs find fulfillment in a strong peer group.

You will readily acknowledge, further, that our culture is one in which youth is exalted. Further, adolescence is prolonged, as we have mentioned. And so it is

that adolescent peer groups are among the strongest of peer groups in our society. But we must not forget the many adult groups which fulfill our needs for meaningful association with others—everything from the country club to the kaffee klatsch.

But here we are most concerned about adolescent peer groups. It is what we might have expected to find in our day, given the particular kind of family life, the kind of economy, and the sort of urban living situation we have. And because the church of today strives to meet the total spiritual life needs of its constituents—not just worship needs—we can expect such groups to arise in the church as well as in the community.

And this is precisely the pattern that has developed over the years in modern industrial Europe and North America. It is my contention that wherever this pattern of life goes, there will develop a similar emphasis on adolescent peer groups both in community and the church.

Let us look at some modern examples. At the turn of the century, there was movement of spontaneous groups in Germany known as the *Wandervogel,* whose spirit was epitomized in the Happy Wanderer song. Led by a young charismatic leader named Karl Fischer, these adolescent boys defied parental authority in order to band together for weekend camping excursions in company with their peers. Karl was slightly older, but not classifiable as an adult.

Although there was something of a rebel motive in their association, their activities were generally constructive—primarily hiking, camping, singing. Friendships grew and thrived; as the years passed the once young *Wandervogels* began "organizing spontaneity" among the succeeding generations of youth.

Thus the youth tutelage (or adult-guided) organization of Germany came about. The YMCA was such a movement; churches also formed similar groups. They were all patterned after the *Wandervogel,* and were as successful as could be expected without the undeniable strong spontaneity of the original.

In the 30's, Hitler saw the driving force behind these two types of youth groups as an available channel for his socialist ambition for the State. Cleverly, over a period of several years, he took over the youth organizations, and the youths themselves. His charismatic leadership was a throwback to the days of Karl Fischer and the *Wandervogel.* Thus Hitler *Jugend* was born.

In England, twin movements were born in the Boy Scouts of Lord Baden-Powell, and in the church-related Boys Brigade of William A. Smith. The need for constructive activity for adolescent boys in the absence of meaningful work in the home helped to precipitate an interest in these movements.

In the relationship between these two movements can be seen the foreshadowing of the present-day divorce of religious and secular movements

for adolescents. Apparently Baden-Powell and Smith were acquainted with each other; there is some evidence to support the idea that Baden-Powell wanted Smith to move his Boys Brigade out of the church to give it broader scope, and when Smith refused, his refusal gave rise to the existence of two strong movements for boys in the British Empire rather than one.

I consider Pioneer Girls and Christian Service Brigade to be a part of the William Smith Boys Brigade tradition, although there was no communication between the British and American movements at the time of the latter's inception.

It is not surprising that both Brigade and Pioneer Girls got their start on a college campus among youth, that early leaders were full of bright-eyed vision and optimism, that these two organizations were only part of a whole Christian youth movement on the upsurge, and that all of the organizations enjoyed a thriving infancy during the intense World War II years. Youth was just coming into its own. Young men not old enough to vote or marry without parental consent were sent off to die for their country. No longer could we ignore the young—and most particularly the church must not.

The Navigator movement had its start among service men; Youth for Christ held its mass rallies and soldiers and sailors thronged in. Teenagers were experimenting with new freedoms—to work, to travel, to flirt and marry, and as time went on, to drive a car, to study at government expense. It was a new breed—with new needs.

In the end, it was the young themselves who rose to meet the challenge with Brigade and Pioneer Girls. A handful of college students with more pluck than prudence, in some cases, began reaching out to adolescents with an idea. It was the idea that all of life was of a piece, that everything God had made was good and to be richly enjoyed, that we could experience personal wholeness and holiness and that the two were intimately intertwined.

The idea had a simple vehicle at first—not a program, but a person: the adult leader. The first Pioneer Girls guides and Brigade captains didn't sally forth to their club meetings armed with sheaves of outlines and a whistle. They went to a community and attracted young people with an idea, cloaked in very simple plans, but most important, they went themselves with the all-important yes, the ingredient of love. There was no standard meeting structure.

But they did meet. From the first, the movement built on the natural inclination of adolescents to gang together. What was noticeable was the absence of a church gang. There didn't seem to be anything at the church for young people. This may be why most of the Christian youth movements of the early 40's were outside the church to begin with.

Soon, there were stirrings within the local churches, and the impulse to draw Pioneer Girls and Brigade-type activities into the scope of the total educational ministry of the church grew stronger. Early in Pioneer Girls' history, it sought church sponsorship, then a closer relationship; today we are still struggling to attain a genuine integration into the local church program that is more than an organizational chart on paper, a weekly notice in the bulletin, a corner in the Sunday school room for supplies, and representation on the Christian education board.

Why did the church accept, and eventually desire, Pioneer Girls and Brigade as an integral part of its program and ministry? When you consider the burden laid on the church of today for the religious education of the young, you begin to understand how its ministry and influence has mushroomed. The average family—even Christian family—relies upon the church for much of the religious instruction of its children. And even if parents provide this at home, they recognize the important of learning together with peers, of "Christian fellowship." And thus, the institutional church is not only possible; it becomes necessary in our day and society.

Given the importance of peer groups in our society, and particularly adolescent age groupings, we can well understand the impetus to form Christian club programs. Which leaves just one more question not fully answered: why programs for boys and girls separately, rather than one?

The answer cannot be unilateral. After all, there are Christian co-ed peer groupings. But there seems to be indication that there is parallel to the need for relationship through contact, the need for development of identities through separateness.

Even in the African tribal age sets described earlier, there was a sharp distinction between the sexes. The men had their age sets; the women had theirs. And in all cases, the male age grades were of more significance throughout life than those of the women. Once married, their age grade was of little or no importance.

Because sex roles were clearly defined in pre-literate societies and because there was close imitation of the preceding generation, it was easy for girls to learn the feminine role by imitating their mothers and other women in the extended family, and for boys, likewise, as they were in contact with men.

Today sex roles are less distinct. Women sometimes do the work of men; men have less to do with the family because of their absence—either working at a distance, or not being there at all. This has produced a need for peer groups of girls and groups of boys who may test their femininity and masculinity roles during adolescence at a safe distance from the opposite sex that may be threatening at the same time that it can be assuring.

In this delicate tension between threat and assurance, the single sex girls club and boys club finds its function with all the attendant dangers and opportunities that you, as leaders, will want to explore carefully and creatively. Do Pioneer Girls and Brigade indeed, attract girls and fellows unable to cope with co-educational situations? Questions like these merit our attention as we seek to fulfill the needs of girls in our society.

All of the foregoing has an interesting implication. If the argument thus far drawn can be defended, then one of the main functions of Pioneer Girls ought to be the fulfillment of the need of young girls for personal identity and meaningful relationship. And if that be so, then the test of your effectiveness as a Pioneer Girls guide or Explorer Pilot is the extent to which the girls in your group have attained these two things. How personal is your ministry in contrast to being programmed?

There is the future to consider too. Pioneer Girls may have been inevitable in our society but we cannot assume that it will continue to be. There is a certain amount of momentum in an established institution that may keep it going—at least as an outer shell—for a time after the vitality of its ministry has vanished. So, in one sense, we may say that it is inevitable that Pioneer Girls as an institution will continue.

But in a deeper sense, we have to face the probability that needs will change —the needs of girls in our society, the needs of the family and of the church. Changing times call for new forms, new ideas, and most of all, new persons. If Pioneer Girls as an organization becomes the rotted old wineskins of which the New Testament speaks, the new wine of creative freshness will burst the skin.

I'd like to be where God is at work in our modern changing society. And I'm sure that He is not going to abandon contemporary men—secular men, as they are popularly referred to—just because they are different from 19th or early 20th century men. When God pours the new wine of His energy upon His servants, I want to be a fresh clean vessel ready for modern grace—grace as old as God, but as relevant for today's needs as for Adam's.

I'd like to feel that an organization like Pioneer Girls would not be in God's way as He moves among contemporary girls and works. But that is really up to me—an you, as we share responsibility for what Pioneer Girls is and is becoming.

If rigor mortis sets in with Pioneer Girls, it is just as apt to begin with a guide who puts means before ends, who emphasizes program above persons, as with a national board member who stops praying or takes a swing to the right or left in his/her doctrinal position.

I am convinced that if Pioneer Girls does get in God's way, that He will abandon it in favor of living persons liable and ready to do His will. Thus, it is not

inevitable that Pioneer Girls continues to exist; in fact, if history is our teacher, we should be tempted to say that the odds are against its continuance as a vital, effective ministry.

But it need not be a case of fatalistically resigning oneself to the odds. The decision rests with us. It rests with us in little ways—apparently insignificant choices such as:

How important is it that I maintain my personal life with God in time alone, while I mingle in the group up here at North Star?

That, in fact, it is the person I am that counts and not my leadership skill?

When is it Christian discipline to set aside time for study, or to listen to a cabin mate, and when is it Christian heroics?

Do I have time for my girls—as individual persons?

How much freedom do I have to obey God's voice about the way I spend my day, or the way I conduct myself—and how much are my actions dependent on what others think?

Do I allow my girls the freedom to become themselves as God made them?

Do I recognize that of equal importance to gaining new ideas is the achievement of insights? That I may not need knowledge and skills added as much as attitudes changed?

The North Star symbol doesn't state it quite accurately when it reads "Pioneer Girls—developing women of God." This is the business God is in, and has been, and will be long after Pioneer Girls has ceased to exist. We have the privilege of being a part of this process—as He works with us., and as we work with Him and others.

Material in this lecture based on these two sources primarily:
S. Eisenstadt, From Generation to Generation, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill.
Erik Erikson, The Challenge of Youth, Doubleday Anchor Books, NY, 1963