

What I've Learned In Youth Ministry

By Jonathan Cook

This booklet is dedicated to all of the youth groupers whom I've had the privilege to serve and will serve in the future. Thank you for teaching me so much that I can now share with others.

I love you all.

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Introduction

I have been actively involved in youth ministry for about ten years. To begin with, I think I was still clinging to the hope that I could participate in the activities and for a while lived in a strange, no-longer-youth, not-quite-youth -leader phase. It was only after I moved to Hungary to teach in a Christian school, became the leader of its youth group and also began leading a youth group in a Korean church that God revealed what my gifts were while also deepening my love for youth ministry.

In Proverbs 18:16 the Bible tells us, "A man's gift makes room for him and brings him before the great." When I operate in my God-given gifts, He is the one who provides a place for me to use them. I don't need to stress about how I can best serve, God gives me people to serve. In my case those people happen to be teenagers, but for you, that could be anyone. Follow the known will of God and He will be faithful to reveal your gifts to you and give you opportunities to use them as you walk with Him.

This booklet, while not comprehensive, contains a few points I have learned about youth ministry from what I have experienced in my time as both a high school teacher and youth leader. While I am still growing in my gifts and learning more about myself and God in the process, I hope that these few notes may be helpful in some way to those who are interested in youth ministry.

Chapter One:

Overview of Youth Ministry

Martin Luther said, "If I had to give up preaching and my other duties, there is no office I would rather have than that of schoolteacher. For I know that next to the ministry it is the most useful, greatest, and best; and I am not sure which of the two is to be preferred. For it is hard to make old dogs docile and old rogues pious, yet that is what the ministry works at, in great part, in vain; but young trees, though some may break in the process, are more easily bent and trained. Therefore, let it be considered one of the highest virtues on earth faithfully to train the children of others, which duty but few parents attend to themselves."

I love this quote and it has been my motto as a teacher for many years. It places such incredible value on something that can so often be neglected. Teenagers are weird. They look funny, smell funny, act funny, and they themselves constantly feel funny, but we were all there at one point or another. We remember what it was like to not be a kid anymore but not have the responsibility of an adult. Unfortunately, as teenagers learn to become independent, their parents take on a different, often lesser role in their lives, but whether they like it or not, teens still need someone to be there for them.

This is where youth ministry becomes so important. In my opinion it should be a place where teenagers can go to continue growing and maturing while being held accountable for their actions in a loving and gracious way. If you were anything like me as a teenager, you just needed someplace to go. Someplace that wasn't home. Too often teenagers find that place in the world, which we know leads only to heartache and depravity. Let's make youth ministry the place they can go to receive life. Below are a few simple things to keep in mind that I have learned so far in my time serving youth.

A. They are brothers and sisters in Christ

It is easy as a youth leader (especially if you have a background working with teenagers in other capacities such as teaching or parenting) to develop an attitude toward the youth ministry similar to that of a police officer. You can feel like you are there to teach, chaperone, uphold the rules, move the event along to get out at a reasonable hour, and make sure no one gets hurt in the process.

If I look back at my time as a youth in the youth ministry, the people who stick out the most in my memory are the ones who treated me like an adult, as a peer. Joel 2:28 says, "God will pour out his spirit on all, the young will prophecy, the old will dream dreams, and the young will have visions." It can be easy to forget that just because someone is young, it doesn't mean that God can't use them. Look at David, Samuel, even Christ as a 12 year old in the temple.

Young people are used by God throughout the Bible; it's not our job to shelter them, but to give them every opportunity to excel in the kingdom of God. This all starts with how we view them.

Yes, they may be young, maybe they are spiritually immature, but we have to view teenagers not as children, but as our brothers and sisters in Christ. In Song of Solomon 8 we read about the maturation of the believer. The gifts are already there, but practical application of the gifts needs an outlet. Youth ministry needs to be a place where young people can begin to discover who they are and what they will become in the kingdom of God. We cannot talk down to them, we cannot expect too little from them. We need to get them involved in the work, just as Christ allowed us into His work in John 15:15.

B. Give them ownership

Part of involving teenagers in the ministry is giving them ownership. Have you ever completed a project? Maybe an art project in school, maybe some sort of construction in your home, or perhaps you wrote a paper, composed a song, or learned a new language. Whatever it was, did you feel the pride of accomplishment when you were done? I'm sure you did. In the same way, think about a teenager in youth ministry who is asked to share a testimony. They are taking a step they may not otherwise have taken, possibly facing their fears, and they will end up feeling that same sense of accomplishment. Let them lead worship, let them lead prayer, ask them questions and let them speak (more on that later.) All of these little "hand-offs," as we say in the education world, create a sense of ownership and allow members of the youth group to buy into what's happening.

Handoffs can be a difficult thing however, if you, as a leader, are not prepared for it.

1. Don't try to do everything.

This can be hard for some youth leaders. I know it's been hard for me to learn to hand things off because I like everything to be as close to perfect as possible. I have learned that when I, as the leader of the youth group, focus too much on the details - music, food, prayer, etc., then I can develop a Martha complex. What I mean is, like in Luke 10:41, I become concerned with details rather than the big picture. I have gone through periods in youth ministry where I have obsessed about the little things and ended up missing the opportunities for personal ministry that God was dropping right in front of me. I was there to serve, but not through the tasks I was completing; I was there to serve through God's leading. Don't fret over missed opportunities but also, don't forget to hand things off to either your team or to available young people. This not only gives you more time to focus on the individuals, but also gives them ownership.

2. Give them room to fail

I heard a story one time about a biodome project. Everything inside the dome was perfect, plants were thriving, the climate was precisely calibrated for optimal growth, but the problem that later developed was that trees, as they grew, kept toppling over. The project ended up being scrapped because they couldn't prevent the trees from falling. Why?

No wind.

There was no opposition to strengthen the roots of the trees and when they reached a certain height, because their roots weren't deep enough, they fell. This can be the same in the youth ministry if we constantly coddle our youngsters. If they never fail, the first really difficult situation that comes along will topple them. Part of being an owner is being able to take a loss. When people make money in the stock market it's because they've not only bought into the company, but also because they are willing to take a risk. It's definitely a risk giving a teenager a part of the ministry, but just imagine the reward that they will get from it. When they inevitably fail, (and they will, trust me) we are there to support them, encourage them, strengthen them and help them rebound. Remember when someone was there for you?

One thing to watch out for in allowing young people to fail is making sure that no one passes blame. That's an easy thing to do when someone lets the team down. Imagine a situation where a young person says, "I'll bake cookies for our Friday night Bible study." Everyone is excited, a few extra kids come out because they like cookies, and then... no cookies. What happened? Normally, in my experience, the one who volunteered will let you know ahead of time that they aren't going to come through, but sometimes that won't be the case. In that moment, just move forward. Don't blame. Don't make a show, don't ask where the cookies are in front of everyone else. If they are there, great, if they're not, great. Ask the person later and privately what happened and if there is anything you can do to help. Always be gracious with others' failures. Who knows how many times someone hasn't mentioned yours?

C. Be consistent

Have you ever gone through a dry season? It seems like no matter what you do, the kids just won't come out. You minister, you visit them, you do special events.

Nothing.

Works.

It happens. But let me tell you, in my experience, in those times there is always that one kid who still comes out faithfully. For me, it was a young man. Who was Muslim. Yup. You read that correctly. For about two years, the most consistent teenager I had coming out to the Friday night Bible study was a Muslim. I had to learn consistency. Sometimes when you know attendance will be low, or that the kids are just there for the food and social aspect, it can be easy to cut the message short. Don't do it. For one thing you don't know how God can use those messages to touch the three hearts (two of them being assistant youth leaders) that are there. Secondly, teenagers need consistency. Remember the changes and fluctuations of emotions that they are going through. It's a ridiculously tumultuous time in their lives. They need

something consistent in their lives. Third, when you shorten your preaching, or God forbid, cancel the event because of a low turnout, what is the message you are sending? "I will only preach in front of X number of people"?

After two years of hearing the Word of God preached on Friday nights, that young Muslim man accepted Christ as his Savior. He said later that the thing that convinced him of the love of God was the way the youth group leaders kept doing the whole program just for him. For two hours every Friday night we played games, ate, and heard a message. God did all of that just for one soul. Incredible.

D. Be sincere

Somehow, and I really don't know how, teenagers can spot a fake from a mile away. And I love it. It's such a good gut check. When kids don't want to be around me, more often than not it's because I'm caught pretending to be something I'm not. You can get away with that in children's ministry and even in the church. Teenagers hate it. They want someone who is real. Someone they can look up to who is not only consistent but sincere. Do you have a relationship with God? Do you pray? Good. Let them see that. Have you ever had bad days? Have you ever had doubts? Good. Let them see that.

Sometimes I have bad days. The kids in the youth group love to see me on bad days. It's like they see me in a new light. I'm not the Bible-toting preacher, I'm a normal human with normal problems. The sheen has been dulled. I'm relatable. One thing to remember is that while it's ok to have those bad days and they may actually be helpful in cultivating relationships, always be an example. If you fail, get right up again and go forward with God. If you hurt someone (it happens, teenagers are sensitive), go and apologize.

Another lesson I've learned is to be honest. So many times we can put on a religious mask and hide behind it. Be honest. Teens need to see people who, even though they have shortcomings, still follow God. That is what these young people need to look to and imitate, Hebrews 13:7.

One note on honesty is to not pretend that "these are the best years of their lives." I remember hearing that all the time as a teen and it's a lie. They aren't. Be honest. Life can suck at times, but God is with us in it. We as Christians have the greatest gift in the universe in that we can walk with God and get to know Him here and now. Always point to God first and foremost in all that you do.

Chapter Two: The Message of Youth Ministry

In education, we have a philosophy called “backwards design”. Essentially what this means is I start with the end goal or the result that I want to see and plan backwards from that point to discover where I need to begin in order to reach that goal. In youth ministry, I need to prayerfully consider what I want the end result to be in the members’ lives and how I can help them reach that point. Of course spirituality is immeasurable, but that shouldn’t prevent us from doing all we can to lead those under our care forward with God. With that in mind, here are a few things I like to keep at the forefront of my mind in youth ministry.

A. God comes first in everything

Like I said in the previous chapter, don’t fall into the trap of a Martha complex. I once heard a preacher say that if Satan can’t stop the work that you are doing, he will try to overwhelm you with the work so that you begin doing it in your own power rather than through the leading of the Spirit of God. We need to remember Christ in the boat in Mark 4. He wasn’t concerned about the details, He was resting in God. Make God the focus in all you do.

Always put God first. The kids will see that and respond better to it than anything we could try to do to get them to come out.

B. Don’t make the “hook” more important than the message

I remember trying my best to make the youth ministry I was leading grow. I tried every trick I knew. We had amazing programs and activities, aka “hooks”.

Guess what?

It didn’t work. In fact, as I worked more and more on trying to get kids to come out, which they did at first, they started to smell out the insincerity in what I was doing. We had pizza but little Bible reading. Games, but no prayer. Music, but no worship. It was a social club, not a Bible study.

We as Christians can never provide anything close to the pleasure (Hebrews 11:25) a worldly social club can provide without the life changing message of the gospel. If the “hook” becomes more important than the message, why bother? It’s a waste of time. Phillipians 4:11-12 tells us that in all things we can be content and verse 13 explains how. It’s Christ that gives us strength. Imagine working so hard to produce growth without the power of God. It just doesn’t work, and it didn’t work. When I stopped focusing on the numbers, and therefore stopped spending all my time and energy working on a “hook,” I had more time to focus on the messages. Guess what happened? The youth ministry grew. It became the place to be. Students invited their friends, their capacity grew, the messages became deeper, the

participation increased and kids started coming for the message rather than the other things such as food and games (which still happened as I learned to hand them off).

C. Lead them to Christ, not yourself

Teenagers are awesome. I once read that with children if you give them a drop of love they will give you a bucket back, but if you give a teenager a bucket of love, they will give you a drop back. This is true to a certain extent, but you will learn, as I did, that with some, the dam will break. You may become their go-to person, or as one young teenager told me, their “favorite” person. This is a beautiful opportunity, but it can also become dangerous. Be very careful when this happens.

It’s a fact of life that there will be some kids you just prefer to be around and they love being around you. It’s not wrong to have deeper connections with some than others, that’s just how ministry is. That’s great. What a wonderful opportunity God has given you to minister Him. You may find, as I have at times, that you have a constant shadow wherever you go. We need to remember, though, we are not drawing the kids to ourselves, but we are leading them to Christ. The minute we realize kids are more interested in us as people than the person of God, we need to make a change.

I’ve realized that this problem can be a little difficult to identify but one indicator is that the ones who have been drawn more by my personality have also attempted to put on a kind of spiritual “show”. It seems like they try to do and say all the right things in front of me but without the Spirit of God behind it.

This can lead in one of two directions - either the kid becomes burned out trying to be something they aren’t to impress you or their peers, or they realize that their pseudo-spirituality has actually become real to them. As youth leaders we need to help them find the second path. This goes back to them being able to emulate the faith that they have seen in us from Chapter One. It’s no longer our faith that they are following but now they have their own personal walk with God. We can’t allow them to follow our personality, but they can walk alongside us as we follow Christ together.

I am always leery of a teenager who seems to be making a show or who could be drawn more to my personality than to God. What I have done in these cases is to take a step back, become a little more hands off, get other youth leaders involved, and watch from a distance to see if it’s real or not. You don’t want to leave them out in the cold or make them feel neglected, but at the same time they don’t need you, they need Christ.

Don’t ever become cynical toward your youth groupers, but maybe it’s a good practice to take everything with a grain of salt. The alternative may lead to disappointment in the kids or in yourself, which of course takes your eyes away from the work of God and attempts to focus your attention on the external result rather than the inward work. We must remember that God’s work

is inward and we may never see the outward expression of that inward work in our limited time with kids as they pass through the youth ministry. I Corinthians 3 reminds us of this fact; we are just sowers, waterers and reapers. God does the real work in people's lives.

While it is extremely difficult to accurately assess spiritual growth in adult ministry, it is nearly impossible to do so in youth ministry. Teenagers are notoriously guarded. It's a rare treat to have a young disciple who will honestly express outwardly what God has been doing inwardly.

Chapter Three: Discipleship in Youth Ministry

A. Repeat, add, reflect

I have developed a pattern when I preach (partially borrowed from Pastor Schaller) of using three engagement techniques to help guide the listeners through a message. As a teacher by trade, I always look for interaction and feedback when I speak, which helps me gauge the understanding of the listeners in that moment. In all honesty, I am not a gifted enough preacher to be able to captivate and engage a room of young people for very long, but I have seen these three strategies help immensely in focusing and enlarging the attention and capacity of listeners. At intervals throughout the message I like to pause and say, “Ask the person next to you...” and then apply whichever strategy is appropriate for that time. The order in which I use these techniques is progressive, gradually requiring more thought and input from the listener. A final note is that I always have listeners talk to each other rather than directly to me. Usually teenagers are more comfortable talking to each other than to adults, although I do like to have my fellow youth leaders dispersed throughout the crowd to help guide conversations. Not having anyone speak to me also allows me to listen to the various conversations happening around the room so I can determine whether I need to rephrase something that might be misunderstood or not fully comprehended.

The first part is to repeat. “Ask the person next to you what was just said,” or “reread that verse to the person next to you.” This happens early in the message to reinforce the theme and direction of the sermon. It doesn’t take long but it forces the listeners to actively focus their attention in the direction where the speaker is going.

The second part is to add. “Ask your neighbor what the definition of... is,” or “ask the person next to you what they think that verse means.” This is the time when the listener engages and applies what the speaker is saying. They must take what they have heard and repeated and then add their own thoughts to it. When I use this technique I like to move around and listen to the answers. This is a little bit longer exercise because I like to ask the various small groups if they have any answers to share with the full group. Oftentimes the listeners like to volunteer each other; for example, “Amy has something really good to share.” I’m ok with that. There is a certain level of pride that comes with being called out for saying something relevant that seems to add ownership and concentration to the rest of the message.

Lastly, I like to have a time of reflection. Usually this comes toward the end of the message and is more individual and private in nature. It could be during the closing prayer that I ask them to take a minute and think about what they just heard, or it could be an open-ended question that leads them to think about the message after we close.

Another thing I always make sure to do when I finish speaking is to ask if there are any final questions or comments. There usually aren't any, but there have been scattered times when the question and comment times at the end of the sermon have been longer than the sermon itself.

B. 90/10 principle

Have you ever had an impromptu rap session after a youth group? The reason I ask for any questions or comments after the message is for this very reason. For me, it is one of the most incredible and unbelievable phenomena when kids are so interested in the message that they willingly continue the conversation. It doesn't have to happen right there in the room, either; it could be that they walk out talking about it and sharing what they heard, or bring it up later on. In these situations I like to apply the 90/10 principle.

Very simply, the 90/10 principle means I shut up.

I (or the speaker) have already had my turn. Now it's the kids'. If they are still talking about the message after it's over, that means THEY want to talk about it. They don't need me interjecting every five seconds with a comment. I encourage my team to have this same mindset in their conversations.

The reason I refer to this as the 90/10 principle and not the 100/0 principle is because there are times when it's necessary to add to the conversation. If there is something doctrinally wrong being discussed, if the conversation turns negative, or to keep the conversation alive, I think it is necessary to interject.

While we should think of these youth group members as brothers and sisters in Christ, we must remember that they are still, most likely, doctrinally immature. It's easy to get mixed up as a young believer, we've all done it. Just make sure that when you correct something it's from a heart of love and encouragement and for the benefit of the listeners.

Sometimes conversations can turn negative as well. Usually this happens inwardly rather than outwardly, meaning a kid can hear a message on spiritual growth, for example, and begin comparing himself with the other members in the conversation. "Well, I'm not as spiritual as you guys," or "I don't do any of those things that the preacher was speaking about." Don't let this sentiment progress. What I've seen happen too often is that the other members of the conversation, God bless them, do their best to comfort the person who, let's be honest, is just throwing a pity party, and if they are not doctrinally sound, many times it's simply human comfort rather than Holy Spirit encouragement.

Outward negativity is another story and needs to be remedied quickly. It can be about any number of things from friends, to family, to youth leaders or even the youth group itself.

Always be there with your 10 percent to turn the conversation back to the message and Christ (more on negativity in Chapter Four).

Lastly there are times when it might be necessary, and only do this if the Holy Spirit leads you, to keep the conversation alive. Ask leading questions such as, “What is one sentence you heard in the message that sticks out to you?” or “What is a verse that relates to that thought?” If the Spirit leads you to continue the discourse, don’t give your own thoughts, just ask the question and get out of the way to let the conversation progress. If one of the kids asks you to answer the question as well, keep it brief.

There are times to let the conversation end, though, and that’s ok. We live in constant discussion with each other. There needs to be time for personal reflection. Just be led by God in when to go forward and when to stop.

C. Have one-on-ones with everyone

Sometimes ending a group conversation can open up a door for a deeper, one-on-one discussion. I highly recommend being available for these opportunities; you’ll be surprised by how much the members of your youth group will open up in these times. I think just being available to listen can be enough to both build trust and provide new ways for practical discipleship. If possible, try to connect with each kid in the youth group one-on-one, or if you have many members, have other youth leaders also spend time one-on-one with kids. In these times remember the 90/10 principle and make sure to ask for and share prayer requests.

D. Love the unlovely

You know the one I’m talking about. The one that won’t leave you alone. The one who always interrupts the message. The one the cool kids steer clear of. The one who doesn’t want anything to do with anyone. The one who’s only there because his parents forced him to go. That’s the one you have to love unconditionally. Pour into him. Most likely you will get nothing back from that effort, but that’s not what youth ministry is about. You have to go after that one. Remember the parable of the lost sheep? Let’s have that mentality. Do you remember Jesus in Matthew 9:36? Everywhere He went he saw the people as sheep without a shepherd. Lost sheep. Go hard after them. Put the time and effort into reaching them. I know it’s not easy. I know it may be uncomfortable. I know that it may even be discouraging, but you may be the only one who expresses love for that individual.

I am only just now realizing it, but I have ended up accidentally being a father figure in quite a few lives. It wasn’t that I was trying to, but it was because I bit the bullet and loved the unlovely. Invest. Keep sowing. Keep watering. Keep pouring out. We need to do this.

E. Get the ladies involved

The biggest challenge I have faced in youth ministry has been figuring out how to get the ladies involved. And I don't mean the kids. Spirit-filled young ladies who are willing to serve the girls in the youth group are so rare but so precious. I have been lucky enough to work on a team with several Godly women who have youth ministry in their hearts.

Ladies, you are so necessary. Get involved. When you see there might be something lacking in the discipleship of the young ladies, fill in the gap. We guys can be pretty clueless when it comes to what a young lady needs in discipleship. All we want to do is play sports.

F. Teach them to pray

I mentioned earlier to ask for and share prayer requests. Because we think of these young people as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can certainly share our prayer requests with them. In doing so, not only do we give them "ownership" of their prayer life, we also give them a responsibility in prayer. Many times I have asked for prayer requests only to be surprised to hear them ask for some in return. It's an amazing thing when they begin to take prayer seriously.

One idea I kind of stumbled upon in the youth group services is having corporate prayer by going around the room in a circle and having everyone pray. Obviously if they don't want to speak out loud they can "pass" but it's become very rare after several months of doing prayer this way. Now I say I stumbled upon it because previously, to open the service, I would ask if there were any prayer requests and then I would pray for those things. Well, it got to the point that there were too many and I just kept forgetting them while I was praying. Having the kids pray themselves is a wonderful way to build a prayer life.

Make sure that prayer is not pushed to the side. It's a vital part of the Christian life and must be treated as such. In the same vein, it cannot become a 'genie' prayer either, when I simply state my needs and say amen. No one will learn how to pray if that's all we ever demonstrate.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in Luke 11 and He demonstrated what a prayer life looks like through the Lord's Prayer. Let's take a minute to dissect what Christ was saying.

"Father, hallowed be your name..." Declaring that God is holy is worship. We must have an attitude of worship in prayer. Do I take time to reflect on the goodness of God when I speak to Him?

"Your kingdom come, your will be done..." Whose will is important in our prayer? Don't try to rub the magic lantern but seek God's leading.

“Give us each day our daily bread...” Only after I seek God’s will do I make my requests of Him. It’s interesting because oftentimes when I begin prayer in the first two ways, I find that my desire may not line up with God’s plan and might need some adjustment.

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us...” When I have expressed a desire to seek God’s will, I will always be led outward to reach others. I need to make sure that my prayers include intercession on behalf of others as well as myself.

“And lead us not into temptation...” Finally, my desire is to remain in a state of fellowship with God and not become tempted to stray or to seek fulfillment outside of my Father in Heaven.

The greatest thing I ever did in youth ministry was to pray with the kids. It may end up that you are the only one who prays out loud, but don’t be discouraged. They are watching you and you are being an excellent example for them by seeking Christ with them.

G. Teach them to be people of the Book

Prayer and the Bible cannot be separated. Just like prayer is me speaking to God, the Bible is God speaking to me. One thing I love to teach my youth group to do is make a “chain” of verses in their prayer life. What this means is that as I pray, I have my Bible open. When I begin my prayer with worship as we saw previously, I like to think about verses in the Bible that reveal who God is. For instance I could say God is love, 1 John 4:8. Then I can think, what is love? Well, 1 Corinthians 13 says love is patient, love is kind. Kind? What is that? What verses speak about kindness? Your lovingkindness is better than life, Psalm 63:3.

Do you see how the chain is being formed?

When I make sure to incorporate the Bible into my prayer life, it’s never dry or boring. It’s never just about me and what I want, it’s about getting to know God in a deeper way.

Besides learning the Bible through prayer, encourage your members to read it and study it actively. The Bible is exciting. Have you ever read about David’s life? Holy cow, that guy was awesome! I recommend encouraging the kids in your youth group to find a version that they can understand (the KJV isn’t for everyone) and dig into it. I personally love the ESV and recommend it, but maybe something even easier to read would be better. Whatever version it is, just make sure it’s being read.

Bring your Bible with you. I know that we all have the Bible on our phone or tablet, but there really is just something about a real, tactile Bible with leather and paper that is different. Being able to look at entire pages rather than just tapping “search” makes Bible reading that much better. When I began carrying a physical Bible around with me, I noticed that not only was I more inclined to open it up, but the kids I was with also started carrying their Bibles .

Don’t underestimate the example you set.

H. Reach out

God's heart is always seeking the lost. Let's also cultivate a heart for the lost. Prayer and Bible study are inward, private pieces, but sharing what we gain through those times is just as important. Teach the kids you serve how to serve others and reach the lost.

I have always had the thought that the only things we will take out of this world when we die are the souls we win.

Encourage kids to reach out to others as they have seen you do. They have experienced you ministering to them, now they can minister to others. They have seen you love the unlovely, now they can as well. They have seen you go after the lost sheep, now they can too. Remember, give them an example and tools, and then send them out to do it. Give them ownership, especially when it comes to reaching out. They will be able to reach far more of their peers than you ever can.

In Luke 10, Jesus sent out His disciples. They had seen His example and then they followed it and reached the lost. Do you remember the joy that they had when they returned? Your kids will also experience the joy of outreach when they go out and minister as they have been ministered to.

In youth ministry, we want to create disciples who will then disciple others. It can be difficult to think about, but ultimately we are training people who will one day replace us. Always give them the tools they will need to go further than you. Always point them toward Christ in all that you do by being an example in both failure and triumph.

Chapter 4:

Practical Points on Youth Ministry

A. Don't dismiss the times kids just want to be with you

I remember two young men constantly coming to my classroom during breaks in school. It got a bit annoying for me because I was always busy and rushing to do my next thing. This might be my biggest regret in youth ministry. While it was at work and I really did have things to do, I was also their youth leader. I could have made the time to be with those two guys. Within two years they had both moved to different schools and I don't know if I will ever see them again. I am saddened by these missed opportunities which God was giving me the chance to seize, day in and day out. They just wanted to be with me, to hang out, to talk.

I have made sure ever since to never rush anyone out my door, in school and in life.

Teenagers are attracted to who we are as people. That's ok. Don't try to run away from that and don't become so spiritual that you can't just hang out. There is something to be said for being a "normal" Christian rather than some hyper-spiritual Jesus freak. It's ok to talk about the baseball game or a movie. Just be there for the kids when they need you.

Remember too that youth ministry is in a constant state of flux. You are in their lives and have these young people in your life for a limited time. Use every moment that God gives you.

B. You are there to serve, not to be served

As we think about putting those who want to be around us first, we must realize that we are there to serve them, not to be served by them. Jesus said this in Matthew 20:28, and we also need to keep this at the forefront of our minds. I am there to serve, not to be served. I was there to minister to those two young men, not to rush on to my next project.

This also goes for the benefits I can receive from the youth ministry. When there is food, I need to make sure the kids all get some first. When there is a message, I can't become so absorbed in it that I forget that I'm there to serve the young listeners.

In a way, it's kind of the balance to the Martha attitude mentioned in Chapter One. Yes, we can't be overwhelmed by the details, but also, let's make sure that we aren't complacent in the ministry.

Another thing I've learned is that when I serve I am putting the needs of the one I am ministering to above my own needs.

I remember oftentimes and for various reasons being the last kid picked up from youth group when I was young. Now, as a leader, I can empathize with those kids who don't get picked up right away or who have to wait for someone to offer them a ride home. I don't mind waiting with kids at all. Every week, in my mind I set aside almost another hour after the Bible study ends for these kids, remembering how awful I felt having my youth leaders hang around for me, and not wanting them to feel the same way.

C. Don't be a disciplinarian

Because I've also taught the majority of the members of the youth ministries I've worked with in school, it can be hard to draw the line between being a teacher and a youth leader. I've erred on the side of being a youth leader first and a teacher second. A teacher has many tools which can be used for discipline. I'm sure you remember a few of them from your early education; various things like detentions, infractions, staying after class, being sent to the office, extra work, etc. I always thought, however, that if I could establish a strong relationship with my students, that would produce mutual respect for each other so I wouldn't have to worry as much about discipline. So far it's worked. I really love this idea and think it's a good practice. Another way to say this is, you wouldn't discipline a peer, would you? So if I think of the members of the youth group like brothers and sisters in Christ I won't discipline them, but rather cultivate a mutual respect with them.

One thing I've always thought about in terms of youth ministry is that the kids are looking for ways to live up to or down to your expectation of them. If I treat them like children, they will act like children, but if I treat them with respect, more often than not they will respect me. When I have issues that need to be dealt with, I just deal with them. There is no "office" that they can be sent to in youth ministry, so what can you do? Just keep going forward. Since the youth ministries I have been involved with have been voluntary, for the most part the kids who are disrespectful or misbehaving won't find the attention they seek from their peers and will learn to live up to the expectation that we have for them, mainly to reciprocate the respect that has been given.

Don't ever respond in anger. Be very patient, be very gracious. If there is a kid who is driving you up the wall, ask another leader to step in and help you out.

Make sure the kids know that you love them and that they are welcome, but that they need to understand that you take God seriously and won't let others who came to hear the Word be distracted.

D. Don't get offended

Sometimes there may be that one kid who just rubs you the wrong way. I like to joke around and tease, and I certainly can take it if it's given back, but for whatever reason, there

have been one or two who, when they joked around with me, it kind of cut a little deeper or had more bite to it than others.

I decided a long time ago in these situations that I can't get offended by those people. If I do, I risk writing them off.

I remember constantly duking it out with one young lady in Bible classes I taught. She would glare at me all through the class, talk to her friends, make comments. Nothing I did seemed to have any effect, but, because I had decided that nothing she could do would offend me, I always was able to stay relaxed and calm. Just before I left Hungary, she came to me with tears in her eyes and thanked me for putting up with her all these years. She said because of how patient and encouraging I was with her even when she was downright awful, I had showed her that God really cared for her. She went on to say that while she had always known she was a Christian, she had been falling away for a long time, but through the love she saw from various youth leaders, she was slowly regaining that faith that she had.

Ummmm, what?

Honestly, I had written this girl off. I didn't have any hope for her. I made the decision to not be offended by her or her actions, but I did not think she would ever change. Wow. God moves mightily through the smallest decisions, doesn't He?

E. Have an attitude of gratitude

I know that this sounds obvious, but thank people. Thank them for everything. When a kid gives a testimony, thank him. When someone sings a special song, thank her. When someone holds the door for everyone, thank him. When your fellow youth leaders bake or stay late or offer to take on a new responsibility, thank them. Not only will this encourage them, but in a way it is a motivating factor as well. I have worked with people who never once said thank you for anything; do you think I ever wanted to go above and beyond for them? Nope. But I have worked with other people who have pointed out the simplest little thing that I didn't even think about and thanked me for it. Guess how much harder I worked for them?

Now after saying that, I must say that you have to express true gratitude, not try to manipulate people into working harder. But you know that.

When I have an attitude of gratitude my whole mind toward people is transformed. I see things in a new light, there isn't a heaviness to the work, but a joy in it. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says to give thanks for everything. What a great mindset.

F. What to do about negativity

When I have an attitude of gratitude, generally I won't have a negative spirit. It's pretty simple. Thank God for everything that He's doing and it's nearly impossible to not see Him working in everything, even the bad times.

Negativity can creep in, though, and it comes from three different directions.

First, it can come from myself. I need to constantly check myself to see if I have a negative attitude toward something in the ministry. If I do, I need to address it and make sure that it's dealt with. If I have a problem with another leader or a kid, like Matthew 5 says, I need to go and speak to them alone. Most of the time, even if I don't bring up what was wrong, when I simply begin a conversation with someone, I find that my negative attitude or thought toward them vanishes. My mind can play tricks on me and this is a big one. Learn to live with the real people, not the images of them that are created in your mind.

Another way I can be negative is toward myself. Satan would love to have every believer and minister become so self-absorbed that they can't even function without second guessing themselves. Don't fall into that trap. God is leading you. Learn to ignore the disparaging voices that come from our flesh.

The second way negativity can creep in is from other youth leaders. One way to get a feel for this is to constantly seek feedback. Talk, meet, discuss, ask questions, ask for opinions. Conversation is a must. I am not a one man show, I need the support of my fellow youth leaders and if they are going to take ownership in the ministry, they need a voice. They need to be heard. I need to provide a vehicle for that lest it leaks out in negative attitudes elsewhere. I'm not saying that I seek feedback just so it curbs negativity, not at all. I genuinely want to know what others have to say, and I want them to enjoy serving alongside me. In order to do that, I need to be willing to hear and listen, even if what they have to say hurts at times.

Remember Nathan telling David that he was "the man"? He didn't mean it in the good way. Sometimes I need people in my life who will tell me the truth, even though it hurts, but I need to make sure that those people also know that they can talk to me. In doing so, not only might I be corrected by God using someone, but I also gain trust in them, and they gain confidence in me through my recognition of the validity of their voice.

The last and most common place that negativity happens is in the ones to whom we are ministering. It's unfortunate, but youth ministry is most often a thankless work. Teenagers can point out the bad a mile away. While this can be discouraging at times, my only advice is to keep the lines of communication open while maintaining positivity. Always spin the conversation in the positive light of Christ. Flip it on its head.

Don't get sucked into the negativity either. Don't agree with it because you don't want to hurt someone's feelings. Hebrews 12:25 says, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God and that no "root of bitterness" springs up..." How can someone fail to obtain God's grace? We know that He freely gives it to all. What I think this verse is saying is that I can withhold grace given by God that I am supposed to give to others and cause negativity or resentment to grow in me toward someone or something. Always remember that God has given grace and we, by the Holy Spirit living inside of us, can as well.

G. Speak practically and applicably

Lastly, speak practically and applicably. Essentially, be relevant. I have found that the best chance my message has of being heard is if it's relevant to those hearing it. I need to know who my audience is, what their capacity is, to be led by the Spirit, and meet them where they currently are spiritually. I can build them up and edify them and challenge them to grow, but if I want them to succeed they need to understand the message and be able to apply it to their lives. As I prepare my message, I need to always think, how can this be applied? Is it practical?

Conclusion

I hope that some of what I shared in this booklet was useful. In reality, I haven't been serving nearly as long as many youth leaders and I am still learning new things every day. There are plenty of others whom I am sure have much more insight into this topic than I, and I hope to learn more and continue growing in grace and knowledge as I serve. In light of that, I suppose I could say that this booklet in its current state is incomplete, but I look forward to adding more chapters as God reveals more to me about this topic.

Youth ministry is by far the most challenging, exciting, and rewarding thing I think I could ever do with the gifts God has given me.