

A Personal Letter From Mike Simons

Thanks in advance for your time to read this letter and the “Calling Youth Ministry Staff” article included at the end of this letter. The purpose of this letter is to share my vision, observations, concerns, as well as valuable information in seeking and calling the best candidate to serve your youth and families at church. This letter is based on the presupposition that I want your ministry to experience stability, numerical and spiritual growth for many years to come.

Vicki and I have been members at Town Creek Baptist Church (our current church) for 5 years, but I'd like to briefly share some ideas about longevity and how that figures into the overall picture. I lived in Florida for 23 years before moving to South Carolina in 1986. Although I moved away in 1991 for one year, we both quickly discovered in our first year of marriage that Maryland was not the place for us. Overall, I have lived in South Carolina for 22 years. We have been married for 17 ½ years and have lived at the same home for over 13 years. We were members at our previous church for over ten years. We believe in sinking deep roots wherever we are; the above gives evidence of that.

As it relates to your current church situation, I ask you to think about the number of youth pastors your church has had in the last ten years, then consider these questions. Did you know that, if a youth pastor's typical tenure lasts about 18 months, a youth would have 4 or 5 different youth pastors from grades 6-12? Does it appear that your church is on track for meeting this particular statistic? If this statistic is true at your church, how do you think your youth are feeling at this time, wondering when they will have their own pastor to love, guide them and minister along with them for the next several years? Do you think they might tell you, “We need our own youth pastor right now who is willing to stay and minister to us for several years instead of a few months?”

I believe that youth are at a pivotal time in their Christian lives; what you do as a church now will impact your church as a whole for at least two generations. In what way will this be true? Do you believe that your youth are to be disciplined in their Christian walk? If they are taught Biblically how to raise their own future families and that responsibility is taken exceedingly seriously, you will have leaders who will move your church forward. Alternatively, if your current youth lose interest and drop out from the ministry altogether, what will happen to the church's future leaders in the form of their children? Is it possible that your church's future will be in jeopardy and there will be no qualified, Biblically qualified leadership to fulfill the Great Commandment and Great Commission? If we say “yes,” then something must be done immediately to correct this potential disaster!

It is known that youth pastors average about 18 months in a church. One of two things happens: they either find greener pasture (which may or may not be greener!), or they get fired. I think that there are some factors that churches ought to seriously review as it relates to calling and keeping a great youth pastor. If your church implemented some ideas mentioned below, wouldn't the fire of your youth be contagious and spread throughout your church and their own circles of influence? And isn't that what we want to see happen anyhow?

Are we willing to learn from someone who has a pulse on youth culture and understands what is at stake? Here's what Mark Yaconelli, a well-respected youth leader and the director of the youth ministry and spirituality project at San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California, said in 2003. This article has been edited slightly for relevance.

1. Believe that your primary job as pastor is to care for the spiritual life of your youth worker. Support the youth worker at any cost, because it will cost you.
2. Explain to the church that you expect the youth worker to be “out of the office” most of the time because a youth worker's office is his car, McDonald's, football stands, band hall, and surfboard.
3. Remind the church that when your youth worker's at camp, he's working.
4. When your youth worker makes a mistake, come to his defense. Help the church understand that mistakes are part of the job and that you couldn't be more pleased that you have a youth worker who's taking risks and pushing the envelope.
5. Keep pushing to increase the youth worker's salary and the youth budget.
6. Support his family. Encourage the youth worker to divide the day into three parts and work only two of them. Check on his marriage, and give him plenty of slack when the new baby arrives.
7. Before the job even starts, meet with the youth worker and then the board to make sure everyone's on the same page when it comes to expectations and results. Whatever you do, make sure that numbers and attendance are not the sole or primary success markers.
8. Don't expect that, now that you've hired a youth worker, he'll do all the youth work. Expect the congregation to volunteer to help the youth worker, and if there's no response, go with the youth worker to personally invite others to help. Believe that, for every five youth in the junior high or high school youth group, there should be one volunteer adult meeting with those youth on a regular basis.
9. Include the young people in the total life of the church, not just youth night. In fact, don't have youth night. Put them on boards, have them participate in the services and as greeters, and encourage the senior citizens to adopt someone in the youth group so each kid has an older mentor, friend, pen pal, and wise sage. Encourage both the youth and the seniors to exchange letters, tiny gifts for birthdays and special moments, and have the students put on a dinner once a year for their pen pals.
10. Spend a lot of your time working with parents, providing them resources and seminars (Understanding Your Teenager, for instance) to help families sift through what's important at this critical stage.
11. Part of the youth worker's job description should be the expectation that he takes one day a week on silent retreat, three days every three months, and one week a year just for working on his soul. Also give him a restricted budget for books that are just about our souls.
12. Meet with the young people on a regular basis, and have open question-and-answer sessions so they can get to know you as a person. Let them know your struggles, your flaws and your passion for them.
13. Ask the wisest elder in your church to attend the youth meetings and report back each month what he saw.
14. Plan service projects for both youth and adults.
15. Continually affirm and encourage your youth worker.

Here's another question that must be answered: are you willing to adopt a new approach to ministry? I believe that it should return to building bridges with parents. The toughest transition to make is to openly and consciously acknowledge the fact that all of our youth have families. There is much to learn about doing family ministry, but this much is clear: we must support families, not seek to replace them! The shortest path to the heart of a parent is sincere encouragement. If we understand encouragement to mean infusing someone with courage, there is no more meaningful

ministry that youth workers can have in the lives of parents. Did you know that experts readily agree that the easiest way to encourage parents is to say something positive about their sons and daughters? Parents closely tie their own sense of self to what's happening in the lives of their young person!

Once a bridge of relationship with parents is established, there's no group in the world more open and grateful. Parenting teenagers is a thankless and lonely job, so an "alongside" ministry as youth workers will usually be viewed positively, provided it is approached with humble and teachable spirits. However, involvement that's condescending and arrogant will cause families to retreat for protection and may unravel previously earned trust. Wouldn't you agree with me that trust is what we want to build upon? If we continue to do the same things over and over again without reviewing where mistakes have been made and seeking to make proper corrections, just exactly how are we building trust with parents and their young person? I believe that a carefully thought-out vision coupled with a well-executed plan is crucial to either getting or keeping a youth ministry on track to what it should be doing all along.

Here are some ideas I'd consider implementing and would suggest this to any minister.

1. **Ministering to Parents.** Every minute of effort invested in parent ministry pays dividends directly into the lives of their young person. There's also much more that can be done than simply encourage. Every opportunity should be taken to speak positively about parents! An affirming tone in matters related to family is so important for this generation as it shapes its attitudes. Strategies as simple as building a family-based application into a Bible study or encouraging youth to ask their parents for advice or input on important issues will go a long way in showing them that family is crucial.
2. **Consulting Parents.** Getting their input on the shape of our youth ministries tells them that their involvement is necessary. A parent-advisory council may be an appropriate way to formalize our commitment to hearing their voices on issues that affect their children. We can even consider the possibility of including parents who don't attend church on such a council—this will enable a full cross-section of the families that we will be serving.
3. **Connecting Parents to Each Other.** As trust grows, we can provide other dimensions of parent ministry. Helping parents connect with each other through programs like "you pray for my kid, and I'll pray for yours" can create a sense of community and the encouragement that comes with it.
4. **Offering Resources to Parents.** Ministers have access to much material that's immediately helpful to parents, such as research, statistics, books, audio or videos that address adolescent culture and a host of other related issues. Hosting an "Understanding Your Teenager" seminar or putting together a panel of experts on some aspect of parenting adolescents is another way to say that, although we may not have all the answers, we can put them in touch with people who do. Should I have the opportunity to come on staff at your church, I'd love to become a resource person in helping parents successfully fulfill their God-given roles.

The bottom line is pretty basic: We want the students in our care to become all God would have them be. And if that's accomplished by strengthening their families and encouraging their parents to be involved in the process, isn't that even better? Being viewed by parents as co-nurturers in the spiritual lives of their sons and daughters may be the highest compliment youth workers can receive. Wouldn't you agree?

Churches are starting to recognize youth ministry as a viable career option and are clamoring for trained, educated, and mature (read, older) youth and student ministry pastors. Mark DeVries, author of *Family Based Youth Ministry*, the book that initiated the first broad salvo at traditional youth ministry, had this to say at a seminar in the late 1990s: “Youth ministry is not working. I want it to work, and I’ve tried to make it work, but I’ve been doing it for more than 15 years—and have had the money, the time, and the organizational luxury to do it well—but I’m convinced that in the overall scheme of things...traditional youth ministry is not working.”

Is it possible that, while youth ministry may be doing well in some areas, it will always have a difficult time, no matter how popular the model or charismatic the leader, of making a lasting, significant dent in the lives of the vast majority of youth? In the interest of doing just youth and family ministry simply because it needs to be done, students need far more than a few youth workers and some snappy weekly programs that keep their interest. This has been the impetus of the family ministry movement.

What Is Family Ministry?

When most people talk about family ministry, comments generally fall into three schools of thought:

1. Family ministry as care ministry. This viewpoint says the church is primarily a helping community. But when classes, clinics, support groups, and lay counseling are dominant in a congregation’s view of family ministry, youth ministry programming is left out. Thus this view of family ministry makes little if any impact on traditional youth ministry thinking and practice. (This is not what we want.)
2. Family ministry for the nuclear family. There are some who believe family ministry means transferring youth ministry discipleship “back into the family where it’s always belonged.” (This view tends to see youth ministry as ultimately usurping parental authority, and the church’s role as training and equipping parents to be better disciples of their own young person!) Some adherents of this view see youth ministry as necessary only when and if it’s a supporting entity for the sake of parents; they often push for youth ministry to take a far less active role in the students’ lives and become organizers of training events and fellowship activities where families can connect in a local church context.

In terms of traditional youth ministry, this view of family ministry is, needless to say, fairly radical. Taken to the extreme, the idea that families can replace youth groups ignores the developmental necessity for peer relationships and interaction, especially in high school, where today’s student is navigating the ever-changing landscape of mid-adolescence. If youth aren’t encouraged to connect with peers at church, then they will find other outlets, one way or another. Also, this concept implicitly denies the impact of non-parental mentors (i.e., youth workers).

Strengthening and encouraging the nuclear family wherever we can is something that youth ministry must take seriously. But to ask that families retreat to an isolated and independently focused mode of discipleship goes a bit too far. (This idea falls short of the goal as well.)

3. Church as family ministry. In my view, the youth ministry world needs to pay attention to this perspective. It focuses on the idea that the church is called to be “a family of families”, where it’s everybody’s responsibility to care for everybody. Jesus calls those who follow

him “all brothers” (Matthew 23:8), and Paul makes reference to the “family of believers” (Galatians 6:10) and that all believers are members of “God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19). Family ministry, it would appear, refers to a commitment of the entire church to be relationally and programmatically connected to the diverse people and ministries in the church.

The church-as-family ministry mindset most directly impacts traditional ways of thinking about youth ministry. For too long youth ministry has been seen as a separate, hands-off program, creating its own purpose statement, strategic plan, checkbook, lay leadership, and ways of doing ministry. But what may have worked programmatically in the past may not be the best way for us to do things in the twenty-first century.

Is Anybody Really Doing Church-as-Family Ministry?

Many churches and youth staffs are moving in this direction. Some are rethinking everything they do, and others are simply being more sensitive and open to parents and congregations. The biggest, most crucial step, though, is youth workers simply allowing the idea to seep into their hearts and minds—seeing parents as partners instead of nuisances, for example.

Some steps to consider:

1. Change the goal of youth ministry. The goal can no longer be limited to making individual disciples of Jesus Christ. Biblical discipleship is far more than just “me and Jesus.” How about making the goal that by the time students graduate from high school, they’ll smoothly transition into adult-member roles in the local church? And as it relates to discipleship, just exactly how are you doing this at your church? Do you truly believe that winning the lost and development of Christians into mature growing faith are to be evident in your church? I strongly support the revitalization of evangelism and discipleship in the church, and especially with youth ministry.
2. Question “traditional” programs. How will your programs affect the rest of the church and do many events that you seek to plan for affect the parents (e.g., Can the parents pay for this camp when they paid for the middle school retreat last month)? Do your programs affect other ministries within your church (e.g., Does the choir need the van that weekend, too? Maybe we could help spruce up the preschoolers’ space instead of repainting ours)?
3. Both lay and paid leadership should create a family atmosphere. We’re called to be people of God before we do the work of God (John 15). What’s a good barometer for this? Is your staff and lay leadership more for the other church ministry than they are for their own ministry area when there’s conflict, competition, or calendar coordination (Philippians 2:1-4)?
4. Be willing to drop some programs. If programs move the youth ministry farther from the rest of the church, then those programs ought to either be dropped or revamped to support the overall work of the church. One family minister said, “Sometimes your eraser is your best programming tool.”
5. Communicate the idea that youth ministry is everybody's calling. For youth ministry to move toward a more family-friendly stance with the church, are those involved as youth workers willing to let go of the idea that they’re the only ones called to care for students? A family-oriented youth ministry program at the very least recognizes that it's a servant of, and partner with, parents in reaching youth. Do we agree with the idea that the church is ultimately responsible for seeing that youths, before they graduate from the group, are

valued, esteemed, and integrated into church life? May I ask: how exactly is this idea being implemented into your church's overall philosophy? And if we don't agree with this idea, when do we become willing to change our preconceived ideas and start believing it?

Youth ministry has a tremendous potential for lifelong impact, especially when caring, devoted, well-equipped youth workers who love Jesus and love students carry it out. But the family ministry revolution brings a healthy balance in that, (1) parents are the ultimate youth workers, and we must partner with them, and (2) young people need the entire church and the church needs all the young people. Family ministry is everybody's ministry.

I trust that you have been able to see my heart as it relates to youth ministry and the education of the church as a whole. To that end, I encourage you to print and read my resume for your consideration to become the next Pastor of Students and Education at your church. I believe you should look for those who are willing to think "outside the box," have a big picture of ministry and education, and desire to be change agents. I am such a person who is spiritually gifted as well as being prepared by the Lord at this point in my life to look toward eternity and see how my background can make a lasting difference in your ministry.

May I have your prayerful consideration of me for this position? If there are any questions that I may answer, please feel free to contact me via cell phone or email at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Michael E. Simons

Calling Youth Ministry Staff

It's safe to assume that all congregations want their ministry with young people and their families to be effective and to grow. However, many new staff people are doomed before they begin. Congregations decide that they need "someone to do the job," so they rush out and hire a young, energetic, dynamic person. Often, that person burns out in a few years, sometimes even a few months. **Nothing can hurt the long-term effectiveness of a congregation's youth ministry like the revolving door syndrome of youth staff coming and going. Ministry with young people centers on trusting relationships, and congregations with a history of rapid turnover have a difficult time establishing effective youth ministry.**

A congregation needs to address five basic steps before calling a person to begin his ministry.

Step 1: Create a team

One of the church's most important ministries is making the Christian faith real and relevant in the lives of young people. Youth ministry staffing should be considered with a great deal of prayer, thought and planning. One of the most important steps a congregation can take is to first create a team. If you are unwilling to spend time in prayer, what are the chances of success that your candidate will stay long term and be committed to the ministry?

Step 2: Create a vision

- *For the congregation*

This is one of the most important tasks, yet is the most frequently overlooked. Together the team should spend time discussing the congregation's vision for youth ministry:

- What do you wish your ministry with young people and their families to look like in one year, five years and even ten years?
- What do you hope for young people to know and to experience after being involved in your youth ministry?
- How much time are you willing to spend time in prayer for your future candidate?
- *For the position*
 - Should we call a lay or ordained person? Generally, ordained candidates bring a greater level of education to the position. They also tend to cost more. Every person, ordained or lay, needs to be evaluated based on his skills, gifts, experience and training.
 - Should we hire full-time or part-time? Although largely a financial decision, there are distinct differences in whom you will interview based on this decision. Part-time staffs are less likely to be trained to lead a youth ministry and might need more support from inside and outside the congregation. Part-time staffs are also less likely to stay long-term. However, part-time staffing can be a good way for a congregation to work into a full-time person.
 - Should we make use of a student or an intern? This is a cost-effective way of finding someone who is exploring youth and family ministry as a career. The downside is the revolving door syndrome that can hurt in the long run.
 - Are we hiring a "Lone Ranger" or a team player? Historically, the church has hired Lone Rangers to work with youth--those able to draw young people by the power of their personalities. The problem is that when they leave, the program frequently falls

apart. It is much more important to call a team player who can work to unleash effective ministry in the congregation.

Step 3: Create a job description

A key issue in calling a staff person is the job description. This should be a specific document that outlines the expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities of the individual. It should begin with the purpose of the position, such as: "The Pastor of Family and Education Ministries works to encourage, inspire and nurture young people and their families in the education of the Christian faith." The job description should also clearly identify which staff member supervises and supports the individual (most often this is a senior or associate pastor).

Step 4: Assemble a salary/benefits package

Because youth ministry staff people have been historically young and inexperienced, the perception is that they can be picked up inexpensively. As much as possible, the salary package you offer should reflect the vision your team has already created. If your vision calls for a more experienced or educated person, you should expect to pay more. Currently there are many more good congregations looking for candidates than there are available candidates. This has implications for the salaries and benefits you offer. Creating a salary and benefit package is about stewardship. It is about a congregation caring for its staff members. A youth ministry staff person should be fairly compensated for ministry.

Step 5: Extend a call to the candidate

- Does the candidate understand our vision? It is vitally important that he be able to work within your congregation's goals. He may be creative and gifted in a particular area, but that is an asset only if it fits with your vision and goals.
- Can the candidate articulate the Christian faith? Ask him about his faith experiences and influences. If he can't articulate his faith to you, he certainly can't explain it to young people.
- Will the candidate work well in your congregational climate? Will he fit in with the rest of the staff? Will he appreciate and support your style of leadership, or your congregation's style of worship?
- Does the candidate like young people? It may be too obvious, but a person must enjoy being with youth and families on their own turf.
- Can the gatekeepers, congregational "movers and shakers" and those within the chain of command work well with the candidate? Developing and nurturing the professional relationship with your candidate is the most important one that you will forge.
- Is the candidate passionate about working with young people? Passion is something that cannot be taught. Programming, relationship building and event planning are teachable skills.
- Check the candidate's references. The best way to determine what he will do in your congregation is to know what he's done in the past.

Hopefully, hiring a youth (and family) ministry staff person is the beginning of a long and lasting relationship. But remember, your task as a congregation is not over when the call is extended. To help provide longevity in the position, you must continue to pray for, support and nurture your staff person. Give him regular evaluations, and provide for his continuing education. Encourage him to think of new and creative ideas for communicating the faith and continually challenge him to grow in his skills.