

Philosophy of Youth Ministry
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Youth Ministry has been a changing entity for many years. What used to work when I was a youth many years simply doesn't fill the bill when it comes to today's Gen X'ers. No longer is the Pastor to Students able to do everything that is now expected; I firmly believe that any person who tries to go it alone is simply setting himself up for disappointment, even failure. The successful youth ministry in our Southern Baptist churches must be a team effort involving the youth themselves, their parents, respected and trustworthy adult leaders, and the support of the Pastoral staff and the local church.

The Support of Parents

I am unwilling to be the sole provider of everything that our youth need simply because I can't do it all. However, this one aspect of youth ministry is absolutely essential: if I do not have the support of the parents, then I'm spinning my wheels and the overall youth ministry will not go very far in impacting our church's youth for eternity. It is my firm, unwavering belief that parents are absolutely vital and are the fundamental core of a successful youth ministry. While I believe that parents should be involved in any youth gathering that takes place at the church, it's also okay for parents to choose not to attend; but there must be the open door of communication and they must be made to feel welcome when they do come. To that end, I refuse to intervene between a parent and their youth unless there is a clearly defined abusive relationship that requires my intervention, as well as that of our local church. I believe that it is my God-given responsibility to help strengthen the relationships within the traditional family by helping the youth to understand their biblical responsibilities to obey and honor their parents.

Furthermore, I believe that it is my God-given responsibility to encourage parents in their role as the primary authority in the home and as their duty to train their youth in the biblical model of discipleship. Because many problems in the lives of our youth start at home, a strong and concentrated effort must be made to minister to all people involved, and that includes parents! If I am to have a significant impact, I will minister directly with the parents as well.

There are times when topics will be discussed that youth simply are not comfortable discussing in front of their parents; that's fine. The key is to open and maintain clear lines of communication and encourage participation from both sides of the aisle. It is a dangerous mistake when the youth ministry is made its own separate entity within the church and the Pastor to Students seeks to deliberately sever relationships with parents and other adults. Therefore, I will use every means possible to keep parents informed regarding what activities are taking place, what topics are being discussed, and how the youth ministry is directly impacting lives. It is vital, if I am to have the respect and trust of the parents that I communicate on a regular basis to all people involved.

The Work to Students

The Pastor to Students is a servant equipper. Evangelism and discipleship are modeled by a Christ-like lifestyle. Because he serves under the leadership of the Pastor and is a Pastor

to a specific age group, he must meet the Biblical qualifications as found in I Timothy 3. His primary role is to equip the saints that are directly involved in the youth ministry; these are the youth themselves, the parents, and the adult workers. Because there is an ever-growing facet to youth ministry, there must be trusted and respected leaders who work alongside the Pastor to Students in the areas of counseling, teaching, and fulfilling the various components needed for a successful youth ministry. Those ministries that are truly effective spend great amounts of time in prayer and planning so as to meet the overall objectives of the local church in seeing that they fulfill the Great Commission.

The successful Pastor to Students works diligently to prepare messages, lessons and topics for discussion that are Biblical, meaningful, relevant, and cutting-edge for his youth group. He also communicates to his Pastor what goals are being met on a regular basis that helps achieve the overall core values of the church.

The successful Pastor to Students works diligently to build growing relationships with the youth, their parents, and his adult workers. This model alleviates growing tensions and builds a relationship of trust and goodwill for all involved.

In his role as a Pastor to Students, he must also ensure that his own family's needs are not neglected. Time must be made for his wife and children for outside activities that are not related to church activities. If the Pastor to Students is to be successful in his ministry, it must be made clear that his marriage comes ahead of his ministry; there have been too many casualties on the part of youth workers that have allowed Satan to slip in and gain an advantage where none should have ever existed. To that end, it is my firm conviction that my wife and my time with her, as well as continuing to build our marriage together, will not suffer at the expense of my being involved in the ministry.

The Work of Planning And Organization

The leadership of the youth ministry comes together under one organizational group to give vital input to the planning process. In a Southern Baptist church, I would request to have a Youth Ministry Committee that consists of youth, parents, and adult youth workers who have leadership roles in the program areas of the youth ministry. In addition, I would also request to have at least one youth representative from each grade. By implementing this type of format, youth, their parents, and the adult leaders can add valuable insights and be a vital part of the planning processes. This enables them to have ownership in the ministry and makes them feel wanted and needed, rather than neglected and unwanted intruders.

If these people are involved, oversights and mistakes are less likely to be made, thus giving the youth ministry long-term credibility and viability in the local church. It will also tend to reduce turnover of workers, since they have ownership of the ministry and feel more likely to stay involved for a long period of time. In addition, if youth are involved, they are actually being trained to do the work of the ministry and are more likely to stay involved in church long-term, rather than dropping out once they graduate from high school. They are more likely to invite others to join them for activities, since they understand directly the needs of their own culture both inside and outside the

church. Parents are more likely to be trusting of the youth ministry in seeing how their part has made a direct impact on their own youth, and they will communicate that to other parents that are both inside and outside the church. This can help them in being bolder in their Christian witness and thus helping to reach the lost world for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Role of Recreation and Social Events

Youth Ministry is not a separate entity from the rest of the church. Recreational and social events and other activities fit into each of the church's programs. There is an overarching purpose in every event sponsored by the youth ministry; I will not schedule events on the calendar because we have nothing better to do. All events must have a clearly defined purpose: the event must be service, social, or spiritual in nature. One good purpose that can be spiritual in nature would be to introduce new teens to the church's youth and adults. An outreach event is designed to provide a non-threatening atmosphere for the non-Christian youth. A retreat, intended not as an outreach but instead as a service event, may be designed to challenge a regular church member to step into a deeper walk with Christ.

Recreation through the tool of sports is an excellent way of introducing non-Christian teens to the love of Christ. An older style of youth ministry used sports events, such as basketball and softball, but did little to bring in the lost student. A better way of organizing the recreational sports is by requiring the present members of the youth group who wish to play to enlist one non-Christian teenager to be on the team. Thus, one half of the team would be unsaved. The Christian teen would attend an evangelism training session prior to the beginning of the season. Their primary responsibility will be to share their personal salvation testimony and the gospel with the non-Christian teen they invite to play ball. Using this has proven to be a great evangelistic tool.

The Role of Theology

What is the overall goal of a Biblically based youth ministry? It is to start, establish, build, and grow a spiritually effective youth ministry within the local church. In order to see this accomplished, the Pastor to Students must devote a great deal of time in prayer on his knees to know and understand what God's plan is for his ministry. There is also the element of spiritual warfare in wrestling for the souls of his youth, their parents, and his adult leaders. I believe that God's work done in God's way with God's power will never lack God's resources.

Because models of teaching change over a period of time, if there is a more effective way of teaching the same truth using an alternative method, then the local church should not be surprised when this is done. Although the timeless truths of God's Word are always the same, there are effective methods not outlined in the Bible that will get the job done quite effectively. Consequently, it is the same with youth ministry. What used to work twenty years ago will not necessarily work today. It is my belief that Biblical truth is to be taught in the most effective way that is relevant and cutting-edge to today's twenty-first century youth, yet not diluting the truths found in God's Word.

On the other hand, there is no effective program or teaching method that can take the place of prayer. We must be careful that we do not neglect the power of the Holy Spirit in our teaching in order that He may impact the lives of all who are in the youth ministry. Samuel Chadwick once said, "The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." David Jeremiah, Pastor of Shadow Mountain Community Church, says, "I cannot recall a day when I truly saved time by jumping into the day's work without prayer. It may have seemed so at the moment, but as the day wore on, everything seemed out of sync, and time was lost." And that great theologian of prayer, E.M. Bounds, said, "Prayer is not the foe to work; it does not paralyze activity. It works mightily; prayer itself is the greatest work."

If anything spiritual happens in a youth group, it will be because the Holy Spirit through the ministry of prayer makes it happen. The successful Pastor to Students and his adult youth workers must never forget they are servants of the Almighty God. As such, they are responsible to serve Him with their whole hearts and for the furtherance of His kingdom here on earth. We are working to obtain an eternal crown and to rescue souls from a lost eternity.

Concluding Thoughts

Youth today have many needs that require a shared ministry style. If the local church has any hope of seeking to meet those deep-seated needs, it must include the parents, adult youth workers, as well as the youth themselves in the planning and implementation of strategies to minister to youth overall. The Pastor to Students must live a lifestyle pleasing to Christ if he hopes to model Jesus to the youth and their parents.

I summarize my ministry to youth with four words: real, relational, relevant, and relaxed. Youth can come and be real in front of their friends without fear of criticism and having harsh put-downs. We will be relational by building relationships that last here on earth and will carry into eternity; we will listen, pray, cry when needed, hug when it's needed or due, and we will build into the lives of those who are directly influencing our lives. We will learn about relevant topics from a Biblical, real-life and cutting-edge perspective and how those ideas help us to be a Spirit-filled Christian who is walking a victorious life in the power of God. Our youth meetings will be relaxed where we can come and be ourselves, knowing that no topic is off-limits and that we will receive a Biblically based answer. May God receive the praise, glory and honor due to Him in the lives of all those who work with our youth.