



**AVERAGE
YOUTH
MINISTRY**



uncommon wisdom for the common youth worker.

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> INTRODUCTION

I remember the very first time I walked into the National Youth Workers Convention hosted by Youth Specialties. At first I was in total awe by the sheer magnitude of the event and the thousands of youth workers all gathered together for encouragement and training. Every speaker and seminar was water for my thirsty soul. And I soaked it up!

But by the second day I started to realize that while this conference was great, there was this eerie feeling that every single one in attendance was just like me. Everyone at this conference was a youth worker, killing it in their local context. And while most people would find this encouraging, I actually found it a bit depressing.

There is this awful strand that runs through youth workers. I think it runs through all those in vocational ministry. We think we are the best! For whatever reason, every other vocation doesn't seem to worry about who is the best fireman, teacher, or even CEO. They simply do their job to the best of their ability. But for those in vocational ministry, pride and arrogance run deep. Many of the youth workers I run into (including myself) continually think they are, or strive to be, the best!

But at a national convention like this one, you are faced with the awful reality that you are not the best. You are not the main stage or seminar speaker, and you don't even have an entourage. You are simply a youth worker - an average youth worker.

This is a hard pill to swallow for most of us in this field. It is because in your normal world and context, you really are the best youth worker. At your church for the group of students in whom you are invested, you are the best youth worker. Your students could care less about who is the main stage speaker, or how many kids just went to some outreach event in another state. They are glad you are their youth worker; and to them, you are the best!

While I have my several dozen students who think I am the best - and you have your several dozen students who think you are the best - there are still more than 10,000 other youth workers also working with their several dozen students who think they are the best. When we gain this sort of macro picture, we can begin to see that among our thousands and thousands of colleagues, we simply are average. We are not the main stage speaker or the mega-church youth pastor; and we are not the slacker who only plays video games and keeps a sloppy office - just average.

Why is “average” a bad word?

I know we all want to be exceptional - the best. Since elementary school, we have been competing to be the best; the best at anything - sports, music, academics, art. Even though our parents tell us we are the smartest, most beautiful people in the room, we live with this sinking feeling inside that it just isn't true. If we are honest, we know who are the smartest and most beautiful people in the room - and it isn't us. We are average.

Average: av·er·age, adj. typical; common; ordinary.

But why does this have to be a bad thing? I actually hope it isn't; because, the fact is, we are average. I am average, typical, common - ordinary in just about every way. What kind of freedom could be experienced if the anxiety of striving to be the best and continually coming up short was replaced with the peace of truly living out to be whom we were made?

Our professional development as youth workers is not a ladder to climb; rather, building a web of colleagues who love working with students. This is a vital calling because we are not called to get to the top or to be the best in our industry. We are called to pour our lives into specific students in our specific context.

Jesus is the head! He is the one who is the best. We are common and ordinary parts of the body. Why should we even be ranking the parts of the body anyway? I am pretty sure that is exactly what we are not supposed to do. Any sort of greatness for which we should be striving is pointed to Him, and the pleasure of being a small part of what He is doing in the world.

Average youth workers are amazing! The more and more youth workers I meet and with whom I spend time, the more I realize the average youth worker is incredible. They are “all in”. They love their students, and their entire lives are wrapped up with the emotional and spiritual weight of walking through adolescence with them. The average youth worker doesn’t hit the speaking circuit or spend their days playing “Call of Duty”. The average youth worker tirelessly loves kids, runs youth groups, meets with parents, and strives to do better so more and more students will come to love Jesus.

This book, which is a collection of my 40 or so favorite blogs, is about embracing the reality that we are average. It simply is about accepting the fact that there isn’t a “top” in student ministry. It is about being uniquely you and living into the specific calling in the exact context with your precise gifts and history. And since there are a ton of quality youth workers out there, why not settle in and enjoy that we are among friends? Be satisfied with doing average youth ministry.

Being average isn’t an excuse to be sloppy or unintentional. It is a reminder that we are called to servant leadership, to be only a part of the body - usually a more common part of the body. Instead of living with angst because we aren’t in a position of power or notoriety, we join together with our fellow average and common youth workers to faithfully live out our special and unique calling.

So, settle in! Most likely, you are an average, common, and typical youth worker. But because we are connected to Christ - and He loves to use our common and often feeble efforts - let us relax. Today, we can enjoy the God who loves, calls, and uses us - warts and all. We can strive to be the best.

Enjoy.

> **Section 1** +Discerning your call

Why do we actually miss out on our true calling?

I don't know about you, but it is easy for me to watch other ministry professionals' careers take off, soar, and wonder when it is going to be my turn. This feeling has plagued me throughout my entire career.

It has looked differently over the years:

Why did I get passed up for that job?

Why does my group stagnate while the church down the street is booming?

Why don't I get to preach more?

Why did that guy get picked to speak at that retreat?

Why did they get to be part of that cohort, and I wasn't?

Why did they choose her to write that article and not me?

Why did my proposal get turned down, yet theirs was accepted?

I recognize that at the core of who I am, I wrestle with envy. Now, part of this is, of course, sinful: Watching what others have and wanting that for myself. That part is part of my flesh to which I must die every day. But if I am honest, part of this battle is that there is a real vision of the person God has made me to be, and I am in the birth pains of trying to work that out.

Please humor me for a moment. Assuming we have done the hard spiritual work of dying to our fleshly envy, what is left is some unrealized vision of who we might be if we were fully living into the person whom God made. What I want to do is figure out who that person is, and run after it with all my might. So when I use terms like "advance" or "move upward", I am simply saying there is a larger call in pursuit.

What I have noticed is, there are three main reasons for justification as to why many of my colleagues and I are stagnant in our professional development and not living into the larger dream God has put in our lives: 1) Poor theology; 2) Laziness; and 3) Fear of failure.

This is what I mean:

1> Poor Theology

When I look around at my peers and see the fruit of their ministries,

speaking opportunities, invitations to be a part of special cohorts, books and articles they publish, I think it must all be spiritual. These people are faithful to their calling and God has blessed them. Now, while this is entirely true across the board, what is untrue is, it is simply a spiritual matter that they are advancing in their careers.

A book that has changed my life is Malcolm Gladwell's book, Outliers. In this book, Gladwell challenges the assumption that it is simply hard that moves people along the path of career advancement. In the church, we can add God's will. But what Gladwell observes is, people are born into unique settings with specific connections allowing for certain kinds of success.

Going back over my list of people of whom I am envious, I realize many of them have had very unique opportunities based on their connections. Working at a mega-church, being friends of a well known and connected pastor, or being related to someone connected are the easiest and main ways people advance in ministerial careers. On a side note, once you are given the opportunity, it is imperative you come through and do a good job. But if the connection is made and you can adequately accomplish the task given, doors begin to open for you.

Now you have opportunities to speak at camps and retreats, present at conferences and trainings. And as you do this well, more and more doors will open up to you.

But what about the people who did not land in a context which allows them to make connections and advance in ministry? There are many youth workers who are in this camp; who excel in their small-unconnected context, faithfully serving. For most of my career in ministry I have found myself among the unconnected. God has given me a vision of what kind of youth worker I can be and what unique things I can bring to the table in my local context and beyond. But if I land in the place where I actually think it must just be God's Will to only do X or only be Y, I am afraid I will be missing out on what God actually might have in store for me.

I love the story of Joseph who had a vision of himself where he was going to be someone respected and bowed down to by his brothers. It was a dream given to a spoiled kid. Because Joseph shared that vision of who he was going to be in an immature way, he paid the price. He was sold into slavery, wrongly accused and spent years and years in prison. But sure enough, as God was refining his character, the vision of what God originally put in his

heart finally came to fruition. A similar account happens with David who was anointed at a young age but doesn't give into it until years later. Even Paul was given a vision of who he was going to be in the church, but it took years of trials and testing until proven true.

I firmly believe God gives us certain visions of who we are to be in the body of Christ. There is no hierarchy of visions or places God calls us into in His body. The body of Christ is too diverse and made up of so many particular parts. The vision God has given me will be different than the vision God has given you. So, no matter what our calling, we are to be faithful to pursue it with all of our hearts and with all of our strength.

Too often, we simply affirm God has given us a vision to do something or be someone, and then we sit and wait for our big break. We cannot be passive in this pursuit of our calling. God rarely grabs passive people waiting for him to show up. We all know it is easier to steer a car in motion than one standing still, and the same must be true as we work out our calling. We cannot rely on poor theology and passively stand by as our dreams wither and die. We must get off our butts and work hard to pursue God and work out our calling.

2> Laziness

We live in an instant gratification society. Everything in our world is about getting a quick buck and becoming instantly famous. We want to graduate from college or seminary and land a \$100,000 a year job. We are called, gifted and should work within our strengths. We want to be high-level managers without working through the ranks.

A few years ago I had a conversation with a recent college grad with a huge heart for ministry and amazing gifts for it as well. She wanted to pour her life into high school girls. She really only wanted to do the deep relational work of youth ministry. There was no space for things like games, middle school boys, parents, logistics, etc. What I didn't have the heart to tell her is, her passions lined up perfectly with a volunteer youth worker. But what I did tell her is, the kind of job she dreams about is a great one. But that job happens down the road in ministry. You have to pay your dues, take jobs that are not ideal, do boring and uninspiring tasks. But if you swim in the right pond, you have a real opportunity to work towards the dream job in ministry, whatever that takes. The one thing it will take, for sure, is hard work and effort.

I am sad to admit I enjoy the show American Idol. It is everyone's dream, including mine, that someone will come across my amazing talent and promote me to the top of my field. But after ten plus seasons with thousands and thousands of contestants, only two have really become famous. It's because there is a rule that works against this get famous quick dream. It is the rule of 10,000 hours.

Malcolm Gladwell sites this study in his book, [Outliers](#), where he argues that people at the top of their field got there because they had invested a minimum of 10,000 hours of practice. He sites famous musicians, writers, artists, programmers, all arrived through hours and hours of practice. His two most interesting examples were Bill Gates and The Beatles.

Writing a few blogs, speaking at a couple of camps, running a stable youth ministry is easy. You are naturally gifted, and your gifts and calling can get you pretty far. However, to take any of those things to the next level requires hours and hours of intentional practice, evaluation, and more practice.

Besides the 10,000 hours we must invest, we also must come to terms with our genuine obstacles. Personally, you might not have enough education or experience; or your skill set might be lacking. In your local context, the obstacles might be the number of students, the health of your church, or your budget. In a larger context, the roadblock may be your lack of connections and opportunities. Obstacles are called obstacles because they are interruptions to the easy and natural flow. Everyone has them. It simply takes time and effort to overcome them.

All of us are willing to work hard in the short-term if there are instant benefits. But if we are truly going to run after our dream - our true calling - then we have to get to work. The "poor me" card gets old really fast, and un-checked envy causes deep-seated resentment and bitterness. All of the kings in their respected fields got there partly because they have some amazing gifts and used their connections. But mostly, they arrived through an incredible work ethic.

If we are going to be who God has called us to be, we must work hard! It is a crime to think that simply updating your Facebook, collecting friends on Twitter, and reading a bunch of books and blogs about going after it, will somehow result in you living into the vision God himself has put in your

heart. If you are going to go after it, you **MUST** get off the couch, wake up earlier, come up with a plan and begin to work it out.

Today is a great day to get started!

3> Fear of failing

Our culture has absolutely no place for failures. Ok, there is a place and it's usually on the Jerry Springer Show (<http://www.jerryspringertv.com>). For most of us, that is the last place we want to end up. We are a success-rich context where doing well is expected, and being excellent is preferred. Failure is unacceptable. But there is a huge chasm between being a failing and being a failure. While it may be true that failure is unacceptable, failing is a necessary exercise if we are ever going to excel in anything.

Think of any task you have accomplished or any skill you have mastered. All of them have come with small failures along the way - everything from learning how to ride a bike, to spelling tests, to leading a small group. None of those things happened correctly the first time. But when we raise the stakes and start exploring a calling into something a little more risky or challenging, we seem to forget that failing is part of the process of development.

When we begin to explore our calling and the challenges start to stretch us past our comfort zone and current skill set, a strange thing happens. The rhythm that has worked for our entire lives in everything we have ever learned all of a sudden becomes a spiritual matter. Success or failure no longer depends on hard work or trial and error. We become hard Calvinists (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/calvinism>), throw down lots and let the outcome be the revealing of God's Will.

Sidebar: I am not saying God's will is not part of discerning your calling; or He doesn't use open and closed doors; or you should not have the input of your community and confirmation from the Holy Spirit. I am simply saying we / I often use a failed attempt as God closing a door instead of me just totally whiffing an opportunity.

The cold hard truth is, we are prideful people with sensitive egos. And it becomes second nature for us to protect them at all cost. But if we are going to move forward, live into the person that God is inviting us to become, and do the things for which He has given us visions, we must get over ourselves

and remember the lessons from our earliest days. When we fall, we brush ourselves off, learn from our mistakes, and take another crack at it.

Part of the hang-up might be that the only stories we ever see are success stories. We look at someone as successful as Oprah (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/oprah_winfrey) and think she just showed up as the most influential person on television. We rarely hear about Oprah's early career when she was fired, worked at a lousy show, had failed episodes, and really bad hair. We only see the final product. Oprah is Oprah not in spite of her many failures, but the failures themselves contributed to the honing of her skills and deepening of her character.

God has given you and me a very real vision of the person we are to be and the things we are to be doing in the Kingdom of God. The sad reality is, many of us won't ever live into that person because of this ridiculous fear of failing. At the end of the day, what is the big deal anyway?

We have to get over it! This fear is paralyzing and only plays into our naturally lazy alter ego. The only way forward is to begin to celebrate failure. Failing means we are taking risks, trying new things, stretching ourselves past our current skill set. Failing means we are no longer just dreaming or talking, but we are actually taking action. And every failure gives us an opportunity to learn, develop, and move ever closer towards our calling.

What is the worst thing that could happen if you fail? Aside from doing something incredibly dumb or illegal, the worst thing is simply a bruised ego. Protecting your ego has to be the biggest stumbling block in moving forward. The person God is calling you to be doesn't just happen. That person is developed. And development happens only through risk and failing; and then some more risk and failing; and even more risk and succeeding.

Risk is scary and no one likes it. That's why it is called risk. We have to re-train our brains, begin to celebrate it - even schedule it in. All of us have different things we are called to do and consider different things risky. Having a picture of what God is calling you to do is only the beginning. Taking a step towards that goal, risking rejection and failing is part of the process. Failing only becomes failure when you stop moving toward your goal.

When I was younger and still trying to find ways to be relevant and cool, I took up skateboarding. There was a park by our church and I thought this would be a great way to connect with some of the local students. What I quickly learned about skateboarding is, if you are going to be good there will be pain. My dream of being a skateboarder for Jesus was shattered after just one attempt at an ollie.

The real question is: How much pain are you willing to inflict upon your ego to fully realize your God given dream?

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The myth of life long student ministry

It seems like just yesterday I was sitting in a hotel room at a Youth Specialties conference with my ministry colleagues. There were at least four of us staying in the Motel 6 down the road just to save money. We didn't mind sharing the room because we could not believe we had gotten jobs as youth workers. We were being paid to love on students and help them love Jesus. All four of us had recently graduated from college, were friends from camp, and relished the opportunity to take our place as the next generation of youth workers.

> The urban legend that shaped our views of success was the one about longevity.

We all had heard the statistic about the average tenure of a youth worker being 18 months; and most of had experienced that number to be a reality in our lives. But this statistic would not define us. We were in youth ministry for the long haul - not just 18 months, not even three to five years - we were going to be youth workers FOR LIFE!!

Fifteen years later, I am the last of my four friends who is still doing vocational youth ministry. And of the dozens of peers who are of similar age whom I have had the pleasure of calling colleagues in youth ministry, I alone remain.

It seems like every young youth worker with whom I talk has a similar perspective to the one I had years ago. And the truth is, like my circle of friends, only a small percentage of them will continue on in student ministry into their 30's, less into their 40's, and none into their 50's.

While this is the truth, it's not a sad truth. I have no special honor for being the last of my friends who is still in youth ministry. It is simply the way it is. While it is okay for young men and women to speak boldly about things they do not quite understand, it is the implications of this false view that ends up limiting them in the long run.

Speaking boldly is part of the fun of ministry. We love pontificating with our peeps and, really - anyone who will listen - whatever the subject. We speak with great passion and conviction. This should not be squashed; for passion and conviction are some of the important stones in a ministry

foundation. But sometimes this passion and conviction replaces wisdom and discernment - and often proves to be a liability in the long run.

If youth ministry for life is your mantra, then my fear is, being open to all that God might have for your future is put in jeopardy. Calling is always seasonal. Our lives unfold before us like a well written choose-your-own-adventure book. The specifics of what sort of ministry we are called to do will always be in flux.

Today, in this time and place, you are called to youth ministry. Praise God for being a faithful servant to your students. But as you grow and develop; as life throws you curve ball after curve ball; as you discern your gifts and strengths; as you grow less and less patient with junior high-ers during a lock-in; it becomes apparent that God seems to often close some doors, and open others wide. When that day comes - the one where God calls you away from youth ministry - you should be fully prepared for that next thing, whatever it is.

> So where do we go from here?

If we have not cultivated a view of life after youth ministry, unfortunately, we will find our options incredibly limited. However, when we see our entire life as called into ministry in the most general sense, we will always be on the lookout for ways to grow and develop. We are not called to one specific task in ministry. We are called to be servants of Christ, wherever and whatever it may be. We must be good stewards of all of our resources.

As we all continue to strive to be faithful to our call into ministry, let us work hard to personally, scholastically, and professionally develop.

Personally

Who you are in your 20's is different from the person you are in your 30's, 40's, etc. Walk into church and look at some of those old people. They were wild and got into trouble. They were responsible and made difficult decisions, both personally and professionally. They have experienced all sorts of pain and heartbreak we cannot even begin to understand. They are a clear reminder we will be old soon enough. Our life will not always look as it does. We need to be people who are life long learners.

Many of us are from contexts where testimonies almost always look back to the time of our initial salvation. While this is a glorious day, we must make

sure we are people who are continually leaning into the Holy Spirit and have a current testimony. Jesus is always inviting us into closer relationships and deeper intimacy. He longs to heal our brokenness and set us on the path of life.

Part of this growth comes from trying new things, exploring new passions, developing hidden talents. If everything remains constant we will miss out on all the colorful things God has in store for us. Showing up ready to explore all God has for us keeps us fresh and growing. The day we think we have it all figured out, our word begins to get exponentially smaller.

Scholastically

Many youth workers despise school. They love to learn, read and grow in knowledge, but see school as a needless burden. School is expensive. Classes are irrelevant. Who really cares if you know Greek or Hebrew anyway?

But the truth is, school is very important. Education is the single most important part of your resume. Maybe not today, and maybe not in this particular context. But when a group of people who don't know you evaluate your resume, your scholastic history is the first score on the pro and con list that will ultimately determine if you have a shot at an interview. Because most young youth workers cannot imagine a life outside of youth ministry, school seems like a big waste of time. But it is an awful tragedy when your youth ministry days come to an end, and the options available to you are few and far between because you lack the education. Pursuing education keeps all of your options open.

The truth is, there is never a good time to go to school. There are always seemingly higher callings than jumping through hoops for the man. But this view is short sighted. If you don't have your bachelor's, get to work and start taking night classes - whatever it takes but get it done. In our world today, a bachelor's degree is the starting point.

While a bachelor's degree is the starting point, a master's degree is the deeded degree for anyone who is called into ministry leadership. Whether it is right or wrong, it is the way it is. Instead of being bitter about it or thinking you don't need it because you are happy where you are, remember you are called into ministry. This season you are doing one thing, but who knows what season is around the corner.

Because we have no idea what the future holds, we should always make decisions that keep as many doors open as possible. This is especially true in picking master's programs. There are so many master's programs out there now and many youth workers pick the path of least resistance. When we are called to youth ministry, the choice seems easy: Master of Arts degree in leadership or Christian Formation.

While these are great degrees, I would encourage people at the beginning of their master's journey to consider their lifelong call.

If there is any chance their call might include long-term service to the institutional church, I strongly recommend a Master's of Divinity. Again, whether right or wrong, this is the benchmark degree for pastoral leadership. Whatever decision you make regarding school, the lens for examining our options needs to be our entire lifelong calling; not this short season.

Professionally

Finally, we must professionally develop. There are so many amazing resources available to us. We must be wise to not settle and rely on our current skill set. Our skills can always be improved upon. We live in a time where there are countless resources available to us, and we would be fools to not take advantage of this reality.

We must read books, attend seminars, meet in cohorts, ask questions, seek answers, and continually evaluate ourselves and others. Striving for excellence is a noble goal. Many of us trick ourselves into thinking we don't care about worldly success, and think terms like "excellence" are unspiritual markers.

It is a disservice to the Kingdom of God if we are satisfied with who we are and what we currently bring to the table. As amazing as our current state is, we can always grow, stretch, and always become more effective. In a continually changing world, and with the task of youth ministry becoming exponentially complex, we must make our best effort to stay ahead of the curve.

Even the most amazing and gifted youth workers are that way because they have put in countless hours honing their skills. All the natural ability in the world becomes dated in just a few short years. But when we approach

every book, article, conference and speaker with a teachable heart, we allow ourselves to grow and develop in new and fresh ways.

At the end of the day...The sad truth is, there will be a day in the near future when your days as a youth worker will come to a close. And when that day comes, my prayer for you and for me is, we will have continued to develop into all that God has for us.

We will have a growing and current walk with Jesus - a walk where we can hear his voice and a character that is faithful in his calling.

We will have a growing scholastic resume. As Jesus calls us into new forms of ministry, we want to be able to have as many doors open as possible.

We will continue to sharpen our skills and abilities as well as increase the number of tools we have at our disposal by developing professionally. When we sharpen our old skills and develop new ones, we have so many more ways to be effective in our current ministry context and in whatever context we find ourselves down the road.

Youth ministry for life is a myth. We must be careful this myth doesn't unintentionally stunt our growth. There are countless years of life and ministry ahead of us. We must not sell ourselves short and limit all God might have for us. We are called to serve in this current context with all of who we are. And as we serve, we strive to continue to grow and develop to be even more effective now, and be prepared for whatever amazing adventures are beyond the horizon.

May God truly bless us who are faithfully serving as youth workers. May we give grace and blessing to our friends whom God has equipped and prepared for a new adventure. May all of us strive to be life long learners who are ready and prepared for every good work.

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Youth ministry is a stepping stone

Don't you just hate it when people look at student ministry as a stepping-stone? How dare someone take our calling and belittle it to a mere hoop to jump through. I have had heated and passionate conversations with many colleagues around this topic. And as I write this today, most of those people have done just that. They used to be in student ministry and have stepped into another calling. The problem is, at the core of our being, we fear it might actually be true. Student ministry really is a stepping-stone.

For many young people who sense a call into ministry, student ministry is the only real place for someone to work out their call. As a recent college graduate there is only one option to explore vocational ministry, and it is with students. I have yet to see a church hire a 22 year old pastor of spiritual formation, teaching pastor, or small groups pastor. But many churches would love to hire a 22 year old to work with their students.

And the truth is, student ministry is a great place to explore a calling into ministry. In this job you realize ministry is complex and challenging. You begin to understand the emotional and spiritual weight of walking through life and working out issues of faith with people. You also begin to realize that a call into ministry involves paperwork, politics, budgets, and bosses. And through the graciousness of God, if you can make it through the church's version of Hell week, you might be called into vocational ministry.

The greatest gift about vocational ministry is, whatever your unique passion, whatever context gets you most excited, and whatever special gifts and talents you bring to the table, there is a place for you to serve in the church. Student ministry is only one very small slice of what this call to vocational ministry could look like.

It makes sense that so many people view student ministry as a stepping-stone because that is what is happening. Many people are using student ministry as a place to explore this call. And as God clarifies their call, many people move on to be faithful to the new place where God leads. Many of my colleagues have left student ministry to be church planters, associate pastors, heads of nonprofits, teachers, and even a mailman.

For me, it wasn't until I had turned 30 and completed my M.Div. that I actually felt called to student ministry. It was the first time in my life I had

many doors open to me in the ministry world; and of all the options, student ministry was the place where God wanted me to stay. But for me, and I would guess even for you, student ministry still is just a stepping-stone. Will I be doing this when I am 40, 50, 60? Only Steve Pace can say yes to this; and I bet even Steve would see his role in student ministry dramatically different than he did in his 30's and even his 40's.

The fundamental issue is not whether or not student ministry is a stepping-stone. Rather, are we being faithful to listen to God and obey His calling? The psalmist says God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. I am pretty sure we are only supposed to see one or two stones at a time when we walk along this path of calling. If we get too hung up on this stepping-stone business, we miss out on opportunities God might have for us; and worse, crush the calling God may have on our colleagues.

May we fully live out our calling to students while we are on this stone. And when the voice of God calls us or our fellow youth workers into another area of service, we will gladly and faithfully go wherever that is. For the glory and honor of Jesus Christ. (Today, I am glad it is still on the student ministry stone!)

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Does a B.A. in youth ministry prepare you for success or set you up for failure?

> A Hard Truth

Student ministry has a very steep but short learning curve. What I mean is, the job of a youth worker is incredibly challenging. But only at first. Many skills need to be learned, and learned quickly. For many new youth workers, it can take hours to plan a mid-week youth program and to put out a monthly - or even quarterly - calendar. Budgeting for trips, filing paperwork, communicating with parents and supervisors, are all needed skills. And all of them are needed at once.

This is why the learning curve is so steep. But, again, the curve is short. Because once you have these skills mastered - usually after two years or so - you are done with the basic skill set. And once these skills are mastered, you are off to the real work of student ministry: Loving on students and helping them love God.

Because the skill set is limited and doesn't take that long to master, it brings into question the need for an entire undergraduate degree (let alone a masters level degree) centered on this profession. I think it might be worth having an adult conversation about the cost / benefit analysis of paying \$80,000 for a job that earns on average \$34,000 a year.

I know I have a limited perspective. But after all these years in student ministry, I have started to see a noticeable difference between youth workers who were formally trained in a university setting and those who endured the steep but short learning curve in the field. These are just a couple of my observations:

> Youth Ministry Is An Entry-Level Job

While it is true there are a wide variety of student ministry positions out there, the ones available to recent college graduates are almost all the same. You have the choice of either being the head person in a small church overseeing a small ministry, or being a small part of the machine at a larger church. As someone who has hired for both of these settings, I have found the degree doesn't matter at all. People called to ministry have plenty of

experience and positive feedback from their peers in a variety of ministry contexts.

Once you get those first couple of years under your belt, your movement up the youth ministry ladder will be 100% dependent on your performance; not your degree. The skills needed to run a small ministry at a small church or to be a part of a team in a larger church are learned and perfected in the field.

Starting in student ministry is very similar to starting as a barista at Starbucks. I have heard from many Starbucks employees that the first couple of weeks on the job are very trying; and remembering everything is a challenge. But soon that steep learning curve proves to be short and the entry-level job is born. It would be a waste of time to devote your entire college career to being a barista. It would make much more sense to major in business or something else that would further your career after the job of barista.

In a similar way, the choice of education needs to have a little more forethought to prepare for not just the immediate future, but for the long term. Thinking youth ministry is the final resting point of your career is short sighted and limiting.

A B.A. in Youth Ministry seems to only solidify this worldview.

> The Pitfalls Of Doing Student Ministry In An Ivory Tower

Spending time with people who are majoring in student ministry often proves to be a personal challenge in patience and grace. The college students with whom I have interviewed at camps and conferences majoring in Youth Ministry seem to all have a similar, narrow, and idealized worldview about ministry.

The biggest problem is, ministry cannot be taught in a classroom setting. Classrooms are for theology, ecclesiology, missiology, any-ology. But ministry is about relationships and programs. And when these things are brought to the classroom, there is bound to be trouble.

Calling is another thing that can't be taught in a classroom. Many students are taught about calling in an academic setting and about how important it is. But calling can't be worked out sitting down. It must be worked out in community and in a ministry context.

In the midst of their conversations about calling, there is also little conversation about the fact that youth workers are at the bottom of the employment hierarchy in a church. They are taught that their calling is on par with the calling of their pastor, who has completed at least a masters level education, followed a call process that has taken years, and is now the head of staff.

They are presented with an idealized version of the church and world where 22-year-old youth workers who enlist the support of their students can and should challenge all of the status quos in the church. Everything from worship style and presentation to justice and compassion issues, to basic ministry philosophy and execution, can and should be confronted. There seems to be little respect or humility toward the institution of the church and the call of the senior pastor to lead it.

The angst towards the institutional church - specifically the suburban church - is a favorite whipping boy in the towers of academia. But these are the only churches out there that can afford to pay for youth workers. As someone who hires interns and associates, it becomes quite a challenge to hire someone who knows more than me about my church, my philosophy of ministry, my students, and has the best plan to reach them.

In order for someone to thrive in student ministry, they need to fall in love with the institutional church, learn from the pastor, and develop the natural skills and talents they have been given in their unique context.

> If Academia Is Your Thing

If you are a smart person and school is your thing, you should take your education seriously. We need educated people in student ministry, and we need educated people contributing to the conversation.

Chances are, if you value education and you want to be a well educated Youth Worker, you would consider majoring in it in college. But because you are smart, you will have mastered everything you need to know in no time at all.

Those of us in youth ministry need to be sharpened by others in ministry. We need your voice to better help us do our job. In this increasingly complex, post-Christian world in which we are living and doing ministry, we don't need more experts in student ministry. We need experts in sociology, anthropology, psychology, theology, and missiology.

Don't waste your time on reading Doug Field's books in a college setting. (And if your school poo poo's Doug Fields, re-read Section Two. His voice is still just as vital to the youth worker in a church setting). Use your undergraduate and graduate studies to prepare you for a life of ministry; to be a contributor to the conversation.

> The Best Place To Learn Student Ministry Is To Just Do Student Ministry

Student ministry is a strange and unique profession. It is practiced by college kids, grandmothers, involved dads and professionals of 20 years. It can be as simple as a small group of students at your house for Bible study to managing paid staff and dozens of volunteers. Where you end up will be entirely dependent on how you do on the job, not your degree. And like I said before, for all entry-level jobs, your degree means very little compared to the ministry experience you bring to the table.

So how do you learn how to do student ministry?

- 1) Just do it: Find a ministry right now in which you can volunteer. As you do, your natural gifts and talents will surface and be noticed by the youth worker. If vocational youth ministry is your desire, get involved in campus, camping, church, para-church ministry – any ministry. The more you do, the more you will discern your call and sharpen your skills; so when you graduate from college you will be ready for a job.
- 2) Spend your first year after college in an internship: This is the best way to see if vocational youth ministry is your bag. It is one thing to love kids and to love Jesus. It is entirely different pulling that off within the chaos and bureaucracy of an institutional church. There are a ton of great churches with great opportunities. You won't make any money, but your experience will be invaluable.
- 3) Find a mentor: Youth ministry is still ministry. And like all ministry, it is done through discipleship and mentorship. You should always have people ahead of you pouring their lives into yours while you pour your life into someone else's. Hopefully, some of those pouring their lives into you are youth workers who can walk with you through all the chaos of student ministry. A good mentor is the number one way to survive for the long haul in this job.

4) Ask questions: There is nothing new under the sun. And this is surely true for student ministry. There are only so many things you can do with high school-ers; so many ways to run a retreat; multiple ways to interview volunteers; countless mixers that can be played; methods to structure your student leadership. Don't be a fool and think you are going to find the silver bullet - the newest and best way to do whatever. Chances are, it has already been done. So ask around. Walk down the already worn path. Then you can spend your time and effort on the most important part of student ministry – loving students and helping them love God.

Like I said earlier, these are just my thoughts. I have many good friends who teach in youth ministry degree programs and many friends who have graduated with this degree. I don't intend any disrespect. But I would love your thoughts and corrections 😊.

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Is there a corporate ladder in student ministry?

What is the top of the youth ministry world? When will you have arrived? Is it about the number of students in your ministry? Is it about working at a particular church? Is it when you get to travel and speak? Is it when you get to speak at main stage for Youth Specialties?

> Every career has a ladder and student ministry is no different.

Let's just take high school education as an example. The basic corporate ladder goes something like this: Substitute teacher, teacher's aid, class room teacher, head of department, assistant principle, principle, assistant superintendent and, finally, superintendent.

But this isn't the top of the ladder. From superintendent, there is an entirely different ladder to climb, ending with - who knows - the governorship or even the President of the United States.

The crazy thing is, some people have absolutely no desire to be anything but an instructional aid. They know who they are, what they are gifted to do, and they fully live into it. One of my best middle school volunteer staff is this person. She is a total gift to her school and does her job with passion and grace.

On the other end of the spectrum are people who are never satisfied with where they are and are continually looking toward the next thing, the higher rung. While ambition is actually a good thing, the dark side is, the overly ambitious person never gets to be fully satisfied. To spend your entire life climbing a ladder, being single-minded in this pursuit, actually changes the way the brain works. If you spend your entire life in a state of pursuit, you won't know what to do or how to feel once you have arrived. In order to find peace, one must continue to pursue something - anything.

> There is a Fine Balance

We are all uniquely gifted and called into ministry. We don't want our over-inflated ego taking us places we have no business going; nor do we want false humility to self-sabotage the thing God might be percolating inside of us. If you are called to a particular rung on the ministry ladder and know it,

love it, and are grateful for it, then settle in and do the good work you have been called to do.

If you have a dream of something bigger and better in ministry, you have some work to do. All over scripture are stories like Joseph or David who have been given a larger vision of who they are. Both of them were insignificant youngest brothers who were told they would be people of power and influence. But both of them suffered some really dark days before the dream was realized.

I do think God gives us a vision of who we are called to be. Sometimes our pride takes it too far, or our false humility shuts it down. But as we walk closer and closer with Jesus - and He continues to mold and shape us - hopefully, we can die to our pride, give up our false humility and be all that God has created us to be.

The challenge is discerning, whether it means staying put or moving on. May God be gracious with you as you wrestle through that question.

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Why five years is the ceiling for effective student ministry

Everyone says “the longer the better” for youth workers to stay in one church context. And yes, there are all sorts of upsides to sticking around. But lately, I have been thinking five years might be the ceiling for maximum effectiveness in your local context.

> This is the pattern I notice:

- Youth worker shows up in a church context.
- Spends the first year or so figuring out the context, dealing with the angst of the upperclassmen, and working over-time to build relationships with students.
- Relationally, Youth Workers kill it! They are masters at building relationships and winning students.
- After two years, there is a strong relational core in your ministry. The new upperclassmen respect you and the incoming freshmen idolize you (in a good way).
- Over the next few years this group of young kids become amazing upperclassmen. They “get it”, they respect and love you, and you love them with all your heart.
- Youth workers soak up, and rightly so, the fruit of their labor!
- Then around year four or five, this group of students - whom you have known since pre-puberty – graduates; and you weep bitterly.
- When you look up, you see that you have replaced a solid group of leaders and young adults for an immature and rowdy group of freshmen. This is more than our weak hearts can take.
- The thought of having to re-build an entire youth ministry with these young and immature kids sends us packing.

At this point, we have three options. We can realize our time in student ministry is done and start dreaming of church planting, realize your gifts and abilities are too much for this context, and start looking for a bigger and badder one; or settle in and adjust your sites for a below average ministry with minimal students and minimal excitement.

Okay, I get that those are total straw men and mostly unfair. The truth is, I have seen this pattern dozens of times amongst my peers and colleagues. I have even noticed this pattern happen within my ministry and within me.

The more I reflect on this pattern, the more I realize there are actually two real options to avoid flame out by year five.

1) Realize maybe student ministry really is a “season” of ministry to which you are called. Now that you have five years of ministry and maturity under your belt, you realize your heart’s passion is to continue with that original demographic and lean into college ministry or beyond. Everyone comes down on student ministry as a stepping-stone. But every step is a stepping-stone to somewhere. Even if this was your mantra from day one, it is okay to allow God to lead you towards new horizons.

2) Do not settle for what is easy! Of course it is easy to take this original group of students and love them well through their entire student ministry career. The hard part is to pour intentional energy every year into the brand new students coming up from either children’s ministry or middle school ministry. You have to find some way to grow your heart and / or share the love with your volunteers so you are just as intentional with the up and coming students. You poured your guts into them at first, and you must continue to look upstream to pour into your future kids. If there is a gap in numbers or some social dysfunction coming down the pike, work hard now to head it off.

> **Pushing past year five**

For me, I am called to longevity - to push past five years and beyond in student ministry. If I am not careful, I will get swept up with the amazing relationships I have with my current upperclassmen and die inside when they graduate. So, I regularly connect with my elementary school kids and middle school kids; I head off potential problems with numbers or personalities ahead of time. God willing, I will continue to have as much space in my heart for the students coming into my ministry as for the students who have passed through it.

This is a challenging job and requires more forethought than many of us realize. We are not to passively blow around like reeds in the wind. We are

people who are sensitive to the calling of God on our lives and faithful to live it out to the fullest of our ability, partnered with the Holy Spirit.

As you wrestle with transition, may you rightfully discern a unique call on your life so you will know whether or not it is truly time to move on; or to man up and own the fact that you simply have been harvesting for the past three years without continually plowing, planting, watering and weeding.

May God give you grace and discernment as you wrestle through this!

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Longevity beats personality every time

Recently, I was asked why the youth program at our church was so amazing. Between you and me, our youth ministry really isn't amazing.

Numerically, we are right there in the 10%-13% of big church attendance.

Our program is fully mid-1990's, and the guy in charge is me. I may be a lot of things, but I am for sure not a piper when it comes to student ministry. I love students and love walking through this season of life and faith with them. But I feel awkward when I show up on campus, and struggle with one on one contact time.

As this parent and I talked, I began to reflect on his impression of our youth ministry and realized our success in student ministry actually has little to do with me, and comes from the leadership of the church and lead pastor long before it comes from me.

> The Fallacy of Big Personality

Many churches - especially in our context - hire the young, amazing, attractational, extroverted Youth Worker. These superstars actually turn into supernovas within two years. Before they implode, these Youth Workers work long hours for little pay and have very little divide between personal life and ministry. They do a great job of gathering students and begin to get some momentum. But sooner or later they get tired, burned out, graduate seminary, realize they can't support a family with this salary - or some combination of these factors - and leave. They are quickly replaced by the next great personality. But after a few short repeated cycles, the students as well as parents become reluctant to give their hearts to a new person who will be gone in a year or so.

> It's All About The Benjamins

I hate that this is true, but what separates amazing student ministry programs from the flash in the pans seems to come down to money. And like everything, you get what you pay for. You may be able to get away with hiring a superstar youth worker for peanuts. But as soon as they realize they're a superstar and could be making double, they are gone. If you pay bottom of the barrel salaries, you will get bottom of the barrel Youth Workers who will stay too long, or great ones who will leave too soon.

When a church invests serious resources into their student ministry program, they will enjoy a huge harvest from that investment. It can be a difficult sell to ask the church to direct so many resources towards students; especially because students don't contribute financially, and tend to break things. But when churches see that an investment in students is also an investment in their families, you can begin to make some progress.

When you invest in students you communicate to parents in children's ministry that this church is serious about the spiritual development of their kids for the long haul. It helps those parents land and commit to the church.

It, of course, is a blessing for the parents who are at the end of their rope, and need all the help and support the church can give. An investment in student ministry blesses 11-18 year-olds, and parents in their 30's -50's. That is a lot of love from a specialized ministry.

> **Longevity Beats Personality**

After thinking about this parent's comments for a while, I had to come clean and confess that our student ministry is pretty great not because I am so great, but because for 40 years our church has invested a significant amount of resources in order to hire veteran youth workers and pay them to stick around for a long time. And the truth is, I am simply in line behind some really amazing servants who have gone before me and did great ministry for a long time. In addition to their legacy, I also work for a lead pastor who "gets it" and advocates for students and our budget.

It is true. My personality is a little bit lacking. But the fact that I have been around for a long time, and am planning on sticking around longer, brings stability in the least stable season of life. What makes our student ministry great is not that I make great videos, play hip games, or gather dozens of kids around a pizza on campus. For parents and students, what makes our student ministry great is that they know my team and me; they know what to expect; and trust that I will be walking with their kids for the duration of adolescence. To them, all of this means I have a pretty amazing youth program.

Thank you, Marin Covenant, for loving students and their families for over 40 years!

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Ministry for the long haul

Student ministry is a demanding job, and it seems the longer I do it, the bigger the demands become. Starting out, I didn't believe I could actually get paid to spend time with students, take them out to lunch, play video games and help them experience the love and grace of God. As I settled into the job, this simple beginning exponentially expanded.

When you take the simple task of loving students, help them explore their faith; and combine it with all of the extra expectations, emotional mood swings, scared or ticked-off parents, crises, graduation, incoming sixth graders, managing your supervisor, changing programs, and personal growth and transition; it's a miracle youth workers stick around for even 15 months.

As I reflect on my 17 years of vocational student ministry, I have come to realize that in all I do and have done, two very basic rhythms have allowed me to continue for the long haul.

- 1) Continue to work out my own faith with fear and trembling. It is easy to slip into a maintenance mode in our faith. Because we spend most of our time with students who are significantly younger than us, it can take a while before we realize we also have the faith of a sophomore in high school. The truth is, our faith must be our own faith; and the ministry we do must be an overflowing of the work Jesus is doing in our own hearts. (I know this is a no-brainer, but this head knowledge must become heart knowledge if we are going to be all that God longs for us to be.)

We must not settle in our understanding of scripture or in our personal process of sanctification. We are unfinished masterpieces. To accomplish the good work Jesus has for us to do, we must consistently submit to the hammer and chisel of the Father. What better gift can we give our students than an example of adult faith in the midst of undergoing just as much refinement as theirs?

- 2) Get connected with other youth workers. I have found that youth ministry is the most emotionally and spiritually taxing endeavor I could experience. In order to walk alongside fickle students who appear to not even care, we give our entire lives and sacrifice a ton of

who we are in order. We have a ministry of preparation and often never get to experience the fruit of our labor. We are required to spin more and more plates; expected not to drop any of them. Where can we go to be encouraged, rebuked, set straight?

We often can't go to our pastor. It's not appropriate to approach people in the church; and sometimes we can't even go to our spouse. I have found that fellow youth workers are people who "get it." They are people who will allow me to share my struggles and my joys. Once you get past the lame dance where you jockey for position, you can actually enjoy some great friendships with people who understand this crazy and amazing job.

Longevity in ministry is a total gift. Sure, it's a gift to parents and students to have a youth worker who has been around the block a few times. But I have found the gift to be all mine as I stick around long enough to see little kids grow into young adults, former students get married, have kids of their own and do great things for the kingdom of God. I would have missed out on this gift several times over had I not been continually working out my faith in the community of fellow youth workers.

May you, too, enjoy ministry for the long haul.

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Five Reasons there will always be youth workers

Of late, there has been some discussion among some of my youth ministry friends about the future of our profession. There seems to be another round of shots fired across the bow at youth ministry and the professionals who lead these ministries. Sticky Faith, Family Based Ministries, and people with axes to grind continue to lay the decaying faith of adolescents and young adults squarely at the feet of us professionals and the failed models we are propping up.

Fellow professional youth workers have no fear. Our jobs are here to stay!! We have an amazing calling and part of an amazing legacy. I am convinced that for the foreseeable future, churches will continue to do everything in their power to make sure their staff includes a paid youth worker. Here's why:

1) If a church is going to attract young families, they need to prove they will care for the entire spiritual development of their kids. For better or worse, a church with a paid youth worker signifies to the entire church family how much they care about families. While children's ministry is incredibly important, many parents will tolerate a poor one if they know that when their children become teens, there will be a place for them to continue to work it out at the church. Think of all the families who restart the church hopping process when their kids reach fourth and fifth grades. All of a sudden, that great church plant or dynamic young preacher does not seem to cut it when its own kids' faith is on the line. A paid youth worker communicates care for this significant felt need.

2) It is a model that has positively impacted those who are now at the age to make decisions regarding staffing and budgets in churches. It is an unavoidable truth that people invest and do things meaningful to them. Think of how you choose what to do for your youth ministry program. Chances are, most of what you do is based on the things God used in significant ways in your own life when you were in student ministry. Youth ministry has now been around long enough that the power players at most churches remember the hay day of youth ministry and the significant role ministry played in their faith development. They want their church to provide solid ministry for

their own kids, and their view of a thriving church includes a thriving student ministry. Most thriving student ministries are steered by a paid point person.

3) Students continue to need a place for fellowship and learning that is separate from their parents and makes space for their unique developmental needs. For all the talk about family ministry and integration, the fundamental task of adolescence is still individuation and separation from their family's faith. Students need a place separate from their parents where they can ask the hard questions, push back, run away, and still be seen and loved by the church at large. Student ministry provides a unique haven in this adolescent development where students can work out their faith set apart from their Mom while still being connected to the church. If you think about it, it's really brilliant.

4) The traditional model of youth minister, run by a professional, continues to be the most effective model at helping students develop personal faith and providing significant water marks in their lives. I know it is so cool to be pissed at the church and youth ministry for all the kids who walk away from faith. But stop and think about all the kids who have ever come through your ministry and reflect on the ways God has grabbed hold of them. We need to actually stop and celebrate the great things God is doing in and through them now. This isn't something to gloss over. A vast majority of those in leadership now in the Church with a capital C are people who were leaders in their student ministries. Praise God for the gutter to glory stories of those people who find Jesus all by themselves later in life. But when you start to ask around, those people are the exception. Youth ministry is the tool God has and is continuing to use in order to clarify people's call into His family, and into ministry.

5) Name one church with all the resources they need who would intentionally staff their church without a professional to run the student ministry. For real, name one. I know finances are hectic and churches have to be creative. But not hiring because of financial hard times is not the same as not doing youth ministry because of conviction. And the churches that rely on faithful volunteers, whom I am honored to count as my colleagues, would pay those volunteers or

someone else if they happened to win the Mega Millions Jackpot this last week.

> **A caveat**

While I do firmly believe churches will continue to pay for people to work with students, they will no longer pay people who do shoddy work. Financial hardship is a reality in many of our contexts and every dollar matters. If our church leaders are going to be good stewards of their resources, they will only pay people who will work hard and do a good job.

Gone are the days where youth workers are simply paid to goof off with students, play video games, eat pizza, and have a few informal Bible studies at their house. If someone is being paid to run a youth ministry, they will be expected to run a youth ministry. This includes program; administration; duties assigned by a pastor; and then video game extravaganzas -all within a tight budget.

The good news is, our profession is here to stay! The bad news is, we will continue to be expected to work harder and be more effective than our predecessors. Friends, it is gut check time!

Are you still called to do ministry in this environment and with these expectations? Do you still love students, but may be losing steam on the professional aspect of it? Is it time to maybe need to call it quits? Or do you simply think I am full of crap and am protecting my own paycheck? 😊

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Is it time to leave your ministry context or just take a nap?

This graduating class of seniors marks the end of my 7th school year here at Marin Covenant Church. It has been an amazing ride; and I am honored and blessed by being part of such a dynamic staff team, doing ministry in such a complex setting. As I wind up this school year, I have started to do some reflecting on a few possible next steps for me and for this ministry.

> **The truth is, I am tired.**

Fifteen years of student ministry has taken its toll. The way in which I can do ministry in my late 30's with two little kids of my own is significantly different than the good 'ol days when my wife and I were partners in all things, idealistic, and ready to take anything on for the glory of God. While I am still ready to take anything on for the glory of God, my wife is a full time mom and part time employee; and my idealism has taken a little bit of a hit.

So what in the world is next? Here is what I have concluded so far:

- I do not want to be a lead pastor, solo pastor, or church planter.
- I do enjoy teaching and writing.
- I do not want to go back to school and get my Ph.D.
- I love student ministry with all my heart (I am just tired).
- I love Marin Covenant as both my church community and place of employment.
- I don't want to just take up space.

As I have talked with friends and wrestled with God I have realized that the recurring theme is simply that I am tired. I don't know if you can resonate with this, but student ministry is demanding and taxing on the body and soul. And being physically and spiritually tired is overwhelming. In my first context I misread being tired with God calling me out of student ministry, and even out of a church context. Reflecting back, I was just exhausted and in need of refreshment.

> Being tired is not a good reason to leave a ministry context

It is crazy how we think because we are tired and dry that a new context with new students will bring us new life. The thought of starting all over with student and their parents is just awful. Instead of giving up the seven years of street cred and trying to build a new program and make hundreds of new relationships, maybe there is a better way.

Instead of trying to start new somewhere else with all the fresh, extroverted, and engaging parts of my personality firing on all cylinders, what if I simply do what I would do my first six months in a new context, yet do it in my current one. Except with starting from scratch, I can now leverage these relationships.

> Instead of starting over in a new context, start over here!

I admit it is a little bit of some mental trickery, but I am pretty sure the results will be similar. You know when you show up brand new to a church, you take their atrophied program and infuse it with fun and life and grow the group. But after a few years the momentum slips and you end up simply maintaining. I know that if a brand new person showed up they would instantly grow my group by 20%. I could instantly grow my group by 20% if I showed up fresh. So why not simply show up fresh?

This fall, I am pretending I am brand new. I am going to approach my current seven year old ministry as though it were year one and I have something to prove, am idealistic, and will do all things for the glory of God. I look forward to seeing what God has for me in this next season and thankful that he is not quite done with me in student ministry or at Marin Covenant Church.

> Man, I love student ministry!

How can you tell when you are done in a context? What do you do to stay refreshed? How do you not let cynicism take over idealism?

> **Section 2** +Discerning your context

Our own Rumspringa

Rumspringa (derived from the German term “Rond Springen” or “running around”) generally refers to a period of adolescence for some members of the Amish. It begins around the age of sixteen and ends when a youth chooses baptism within the Amish church or, instead, leaves the community. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumspringa>).

In one of our upperclassman small groups, a student made a passing comment I have been wrestling with for the past couple of days. She simply observed that their once full table of students during small group time had withered over the last couple of years. Where a once a robust small group of 15 gathered, now remains a consistent remnant of six.

As my wife and I talked, we could account for almost every student who has faded away from our student ministry. And for almost every student, there was an explanation; most of which happened to be small changes in priorities leaving them less connected and ending up M.I.A.

For the last 15 years I have wrestled with the continual transition of our student ministry population. Our ministry is made up of a relatively small core of students along with a bunch of students filtering in and out based on friendship connections, sports and play responsibilities, etc. But I wonder whether something else might be happening in the hearts of our students. What if our students genuinely need their own Rumspringa?

In my context it is taboo to even consider an intentional separation from the church community while they figure out whether or not they are really in. But, basically, this is what is happening; both through experience as well as confirmation from some of the writing on student ministry.

1) Students need to develop a faith separate from their families:

There has been so much writing about the process of individuation. Chap Clark has done some of the best research and clear writing on this in his book, Hurt and Starting Right. (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0310234069/averyoutmini-20>)

Basically, students must figure out who they are and what they believe. And if their families are super connected to your church, there will be a season where students will have to wrestle with their

place in your community. Sometimes this results in them having to leave and be a part of another ministry or church; or wandering away altogether.

2) **Students need space to identify what they actually believe:** Most student ministries do a great job at painting a compelling picture of a life connected to Jesus. As this happens, we (or maybe just me) make assumptions that everyone is on board. And when we don't give any space for disagreement, we are asking students to assent to things they don't yet own. If there is not space to disagree, their only option is to flee. I would rather have a student who is not on board and wrestling through issues than completely bail and have no opportunity for a relationship.

3) **Students may not want to be followers of Christ:** This is the most brutal option. It is in our blood as youth to win students and collect a wide variety of them from every walk of life. We take pride in the diversity of our ministry. But as students get older and start to really understand what we are talking about, they may actually not want this life of faith we talk about every week. This reality shouldn't shock us. It is reality. A friendship with a youth leader is not going to be enough to keep them connected if there is no concern for the faith we talk about.

4) **Students need to be released with a clear and open path to return:** It is normal and natural for students to walk away from their faith, or to never develop a personal faith at all. And when students figure this out and walk away from our student ministries (and the church), we must create an ethos of love and grace. If we hold on too tight, give ultimatums and use scare tactics, we only further alienate them from the family of God. Our job is to graciously allow them to Rumspringa or run around; and communicate with them that, if they want, they will always be welcome home.

This is exactly the heart of the prodigal's father. The son had all the freedom in the world to run around. And we get to be the brokenhearted father on the edge of our property longing, and praying, for our kids' safe and quick return. Whether or not we get to experience that joy, we will continue to gather students, share the love and grace of Jesus Christ, and

help them make their faith their own. And for the students who need to explore other options, we send them off with just as much love and grace.

Lord, please continue to woo the hearts of our many prodigal kids out there! ?

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A youth group that welcomes the rebellious and the religious

> How Did He Do It?

I recently read through the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. This time, what stood out to me was not the son's rebellion; not the other son's hard heart; not even the father's lavish grace. This time, when I read through this story I was struck by what was not said; what was not described; but what must have been true in the relationship between the father and his boys.

Of course it is a lavish grace the father extends. But what is amazing is the manner in which the father lived in front of his sons in order to make it possible for both of them to return to intimate relationship. Somehow, the father communicated his love and grace - because the prodigal son knew in the depth of his being that his father would take him back. I know that the scriptures place him in a humble position, willing to take a position as a slave - but still, the son knew he could go back; even after completely shaming his family and, specifically, his father. So at the depth of despair, in his hour of need, he remembered that his childhood home was an option for getting him out of this mess.

This is the part of the story upon which I wish there was more clarity. How in the world did the father communicate his overwhelming love and grace to his sons so that they knew in their heart of hearts they would always have a place at the table?

> A Ministry Reflecting the Father's Heart:

As we kick off another year of student ministry, I am confronted with the awful reality that there is little rhyme or reason to the spiritual life of a teenager. One season they are on fire, leaders in their youth group and on their campus, the next they bottom out and walk away from it all. Some students push away as hard as they can as a kind of test to see how much our love and grace will stretch. Others find fulfillment in being the teacher's pet of the youth group; yet, inside their heart it's just as cold and unredeemed.

No matter what path our students take in their walk with God, I am inspired to lead a ministry that reflects the lavish love and grace our Father has given to us. Somehow, I want to live in a way that the rebellious kid knows that the church, the people of God; and God Himself is always anxiously waiting on the edge of our property scanning the horizon, longing for their return. And when they do come back, we heap celebration on them, not shame.

I also want to be loving enough to make sure I am not caught up in the religiosity of my best kids. In the process of them being my number one leader, their heart could be growing cold and distant and, without realizing it, I could be teaching them that their identity and worth is dependent upon performance as opposed to the fact that God simply loves them. I must continue to run after these students, lavish God's love and grace and continue to invite them to the party!

May our youth group be a place where all are welcomed; no matter their past, present, or their future. When they are here they will experience love and grace. And when they remain outside out of protest or rebellion, I will mimic the actions of the Father and invite them back in; anxiously scanning the horizon for their return.

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An Evangelical approach to the LGBT community

We have not done this right. Somehow the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, has become associated with bigotry and hate speech. Somewhere along the way, we seemed to have gotten lost. I wonder if there is another approach that allows us to hold on to our Evangelical values at the same time it makes space for the LGBT (lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgender) community.

> The Unforgivable Sin:

For anyone who has been around the church for a little bit, it becomes clear there are certain unacceptable sins. The reality is, it is only the sexual sins that are singled out as too horrible to be tolerated within the community: Promiscuity, pornography, infidelity or homosexuality. If any of these come to light, it is time to look for a new church.

What is communicated is, there are big sins - mostly sexual - that are dirty and unacceptable to work out in community. All the other sins are little and can be joked about. Because of this reality, the people in our congregations who struggle with sexual sin must conceal it and live in fear of being found out. Or, if they have had victory over it for at least ten years, they can give testimony. But to actively make space for people to wrestle through sexual brokenness is a lost art. Yet, it's a necessary one the church must embrace if we are to truly be bearers of good news.

It is a shame that sexual sin is the unforgivable sin in the church. As we read through scripture, abuse of power and money are the sins that seem to be the biggest stumbling blocks toward a life in Christ. Imagine if some of our Christian brothers and sisters from Nigeria came and visited our worship gathering on a Sunday morning. I have a feeling they would experience shock and horror; appalled at our blatant sin. But our sin would not be sexual. It would be how we worship materialism and status.

We love holding other people's feet to the fire when we talk about sinning. But most of us in church are too quick to turn a blind eye to sin that runs rampant within our congregations. Sure, the big ones that would get us fired are kept below the radar. I am talking about the ones we have made culturally acceptable: Materialism, status, busyness, individualism, and

breaking the Sabbath. There is real sin running amuck in our churches and in our lives. And unless we deal with it, we will only experience a limited gospel with limited sanctification, and limited impact in the world around us.

> A Lifelong Process of Sanctification:

Without throwing away sanctification, what if we embrace the fuller meaning of it? Sanctification is the process of becoming more and more like Christ. We think it means “once I become a Christian then I won’t swear or look at porn or no longer be gay”. But the truth is, I am so broken, I don’t think I will ever get to a place where my Nigerian brothers and sisters would not question my salvation. I am too immersed in this broken culture - and not even in tune with some of my brokenness.

Rather, what if we saw sanctification as simply becoming more and more like Christ? This process continues until the day we die; not one we put on hold when we can finally enjoy fellowship within a suburban church without feeling shame. The truth is, that bar is pretty low. If, instead, the bar is continual refinement toward a life in Christ, we will recognize we are all in process and in continual need of a Savior.

> The Goal is Identity Formation, Not Sin Management.

Managing sin - striving to be acceptable in the culture of the church - is an awful goal. What if our ending point is having our identity fully wrapped up in Christ? The other things that shape my identity should start to fade, compared with who I am in Christ. No longer do I hold on to my rights as a heterosexual, a male, a white male, father, pastor, home owner, etc. My identity is first in Christ, and that identity shapes everything else. As we begin to understand sanctification is really identity formation rather than sin management, we now have an opportunity to find common ground with our friends in the LGBT community.

All of us have a misconception about who we are. We all put our hope and identity in the wrong things. Depending upon our backgrounds, the wounds we’ve experienced, our own rebellion, or the awful impact of others’ sin on our lives have all crushed us in a wide variety of ways. Some of those ways

are easy to conceal, and some we wear on our sleeves for the whole world to see.

For the LGBT, it is not right for us to ask them to become “acceptable” suburban church folk, period. We should not be asking them to give up who they are or who they think they are in order to consider Christ or be welcomed into our community. We must recognize they are broken, just like we are broken, and we are all on a journey towards the cross of Christ. My worldview and baggage is uniquely mine and lived out in a way specific to me. Some of the ways I’m broken might not even get addressed until pretty far down the road - or maybe never - this side of eternity. Plenty needs to be healed and redeemed in my own life; some of which I am not even yet aware. Maybe - just maybe - sexual identity doesn’t have to be the first order of business when we begin the sanctification process.

> Let’s Take the Plank Out of Our Own Eye First:

Evangelical Christianity seems to have a special knack for calling out the sin of others long before they are willing to address their own. If Christian leaders were relentless at calling out the sins and brokenness of their own communities, the Church might not be seen as so hypocritical.

I am in no way condoning sin or sinful behavior. I am simply asking the church to lean into Matthew 7:5 which says, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” We have some planks blocking our sight. So let’s deal with them. Then we can be gracious to those around us who have specks that need grace and compassion to remove. As we reflect on our own planks, we will quickly see we are broken far more deeply than we realize and in desperate need of God’s grace. In this posture, we can walk with others in their sin and brokenness.

> A Gospel for the Broken:

Sin management has not worked. It hasn’t worked in the church, and it for sure has not worked in my own life. Sin management is what’s made our gospel too small. If we truly want to reach out to lost and broken people, we need to be fellow sojourners with them. We cannot forget that we, too, are broken people who have a messed-up view of ourselves and are in the

process of being healed; becoming more and more conformed to the image and identity of Christ.

All who are broken, marginalized, discarded, discounted, are invited to have seats of honor at the wedding feast of the Lamb. How awful it is when the church does not heed the warnings of Jesus in Matthew 23. “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.’” If we are not careful, sexual wholeness and purity becomes our version of heavy and cumbersome loads we place on people. Maybe our job is to allow God to reveal the areas of sin to be wrestled within the right timing for that person; and as God’s people we bear with one another as we together move towards sanctification.

The church has been given the sacred burden and honor to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ until He comes again. We must be willing to re-examine our view of the Gospel. But in order to do that, are we willing to examine our own hearts, our own lives, our own churches to see the enormous planks of brokenness in our own eyes? We pretend these planks aren’t there. But do others look on in horror? Maybe we can be a little more humble and recognize we are all severely broken and all of us have a severe identity problem. The only solution - the only way for hope and healing - is to surrender our lives, admit our brokenness, and trust Jesus will heal us. This process of sanctification is never done and will look different for everyone.

This is a complex issue; one that needs a considerable amount of humility, grace, and thoughtfulness. As our world becomes more and more post-modern and post-Christian, the traditional views and values are becoming a minority opinion. We must think well through this topic as we walk alongside students and our neighbors so we do not lose the opportunity to share the good news of salvation and grace that is found in Jesus Christ, who has exchanged our sin and brokenness and exchanged it for righteousness. We were once not a people, and now we are the people of God.

My hope and prayer is, the church will once again be the bearers of good news to all people everywhere. No matter where you start, where you are now, or even where you will end up on this side of eternity; if you are broken and in need of a healer, Jesus is your Savior and we, the Church, are your people!

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Time to accept that 90% of our students will bail on the church and their faith after high school

Lately, there has been a lot written about what is going on with our students and why they are leaving the church in record numbers after they graduate from college. It seems to me this is a problem that has been around forever; or at least since I graduated from high school. (Back when Pearl Jam was King!)

What would it look like if we quit wringing our hands about this awful statistic and accepted this as reality?

Everything I have read says part of the adolescent journey is separating their identity from their family and faith of origin to develop an independent identity. This process of individuation is understanding who they are, where they belong, and whether they matter. And these questions cannot be done under the thumb of their parents, or their parents' youth pastor.

So, If 70% to 90% of my students are going to push back from the faith of their childhood during late adolescence, what is my response going to be?

It seems like blaming the church, youth ministry, culture, whatever, doesn't move this conversation forward. Maybe there needs to be a different framing question. Instead of asking, "Why are so many students leaving the church?" Perhaps a better question is, "Why are so few students returning to the church after they become adults?"

If it is a known fact that so many of the students who wander through the doors of my student ministry are going to bail on the church and their faith for part of their adolescent development, then I think my job is to create a ministry that leaves these students with a picture of the church and faith that is worthwhile to come back to when they are ready to be adults.

The question shaping my ministry over the past few years has not been how to make sure kids don't bail - but rather, are we painting a picture of the Christian faith worthy of adulthood. I think the story of the Prodigal Son is a great starting point for figuring out how to give our students space to rebel and space to return.

May we have the heart of the Prodigal's Father.

With all my heart, I want to model the heart of the father who loves his students, who longs to do life alongside his students, who will make space for students to bail, who will wait with anticipation on the edge of the property for them to return, and who will welcome them back with open arms and no judgment.

Our students deserve a picture of mature Christian faith that is compelling and complex enough to make it worthwhile for them to someday return to when they are done rebelling and pushing away from their childhood identity. We cannot make our faith smaller and easier to swallow as we lock down our students in fear of rebellion. Rather, we extravagantly love them and give them space to walk their path; the one that Jesus has gone before them as the author, pioneer, and perfecter of their faith!

How would your youth ministry look if you asked a different question?

What would it look like if you were less concerned about them wandering away, and more about making the Christian faith a viable option in adulthood?

May we continue to have the heart of the Father as we watch with broken-hearts our students wander away, and ever hope for their return.

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An easy onramp back to the church

> Oh, How Nice It Would Feel To Drop the Hammer of Truth!

I can't tell you the number of times I've had high school-ers lay into me about how youth group doesn't do it for them anymore; or about how they need something with more depth. Sometimes I lie awake at night imagining all the ways I would love to give it right back to them; to actually be a straight shooter and tell them how it really is. But just when I'm about to explode and completely blow away some unsuspecting, verbally processing mid-adolescent, God gives me a gracious reminder of my unique role and purpose in the body of Christ.

I recently had lunch with a former student who was the thorn in my side during her time in my student ministry. Everything I did wasn't good enough; every lesson not deep enough; and every other adult in her life was smarter and wiser than I ever could be. Now, while most of my students probably already believe this, this young woman decided to make it very clear to me how dissatisfied she was with my leadership of our group.

I distinctly remember a conversation we had at the end of her sophomore year, when she tried to let me down easy. She would no longer be joining us for Sunday School because it was baby food; and she would be going to big church instead. She then proceeded to invite any other students who wanted real spiritual food to join her.

> Their Self-Righteous and Rebellion is Right and Normal:

Part of the developmental process of adolescence is defining their own faith by separating themselves from the faith of their families; and sometimes even their church, or me. While I totally get that students need to stretch their wings and learn to spiritually fly, it still crushes my spirit. I know I should be mature enough to handle the ridicule of my faith, my job and my calling by someone who wasn't even born when I started doing student ministry. And I should be gracious enough to absorb the observation of the shallowness of my faith and lack of biblical depth, even though I aced seminary and they are getting a D in Algebra. But I am not. At least, not at first.

It would be great if the job of the youth worker was to take these teachable moments and drive home the truth of the situation with a sledgehammer; to clarify their hypocrisy, fickleness and self-righteousness, combined with self-absorption. But I firmly believe being the arbiters of truth is not our calling; rather we are to be fountains of grace.

Jesus Christ was the perfect completion and balance of truth and grace. Many times we lie to ourselves and think we can be balanced in doling out these attributes as well. But I have found that in student ministry, grace is far more what is needed than truth. For a teenager, the emotion surrounding an idea or place carries much more weight than logical truth. And because of this, it is imperative for youth workers to graciously walk through the emotional ups and downs in the faith development of students rather than lay down the law and hold their feet to the fire.

> **Okay, back to my lunch . . .**

As we sat down to eat, I had no idea what to expect from her since we, obviously, hadn't been that close during the end of her high school career or throughout college. But what came out of her mouth was totally unexpected. She began the conversation with, "Ben, I wanted to apologize for the way I treated you and our church during my time in the youth group." I was blown away and almost cried. (Almost crying is crying for normal people.) I had forgiven this young woman years ago. To hear the apology brought instant restoration in our relationship.

The rest of our time together was her telling of the way that God had been graciously drawing her back to Jesus. She is a part of an amazing Christian community she picked on her own while away at college. As she's worked out her own faith, she has been able to reflect back and own the places where her self-righteousness caused harm. Apologizing to me is part of her moving forward in her own journey, and a great byproduct re-opened the door for me to be her biggest cheerleader.

If I am honest, this isn't a unique story. There are countless students who have done this to us. And, the truth is, all of us at one point or another have also gotten a little too excited in the area of self-righteousness. I remember when I first really started developing my own, distinct faith and how I blew up the adults, church leaders, and friends as I worked out my own junk.

> We Must Make Bigger Onramps not Harsher Billboards:

Being wrong or self-righteous - totally missing God's voice or direction - is part of working it out. Even total rebellion and walking away from the faith is often part of the adolescent process. Because the emotional memory of an encounter and relationship will always trump the truth of the content of an encounter, we must ooze grace and give space for students to work it out. This is vital to our calling because, at some point in the future, the Holy Spirit will actually knock loud enough on the hearts of our old students to call them back to Jesus and to the Church. The work we do in these moments of potential confrontation can either shut down that process completely or, instead, make giant, easy onramps back into Christian community.

It is a fine line we walk as youth workers. After this lunch, I am once again reminded that my job is to be the adult in the relationship. I am to be emotionally stable, kind, gracious, and gentle. I am not the one who convicts of sin or leads to repentance. That is the job of the Holy Spirit. The more I remember that, the longer my view gets; and the better I can do my true job of providing opportunities and onramps for students to know Jesus and be involved in the Church. The how and when they choose to take advantage of those opportunities is up to God.

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The hidden dangers of mission trips for students

It is once again time to start gearing up for our annual mission trips. There are so many great options out there. Some are as close as an urban setting; some are in rural and isolated contexts; others are international, ranging in proximity from Mexico all the way to Thailand or Africa. One of the key considerations when planning a mission trip with students has to include assessing the potential dangers of the context to where we will travel.

Several times, our church has changed our context for short-term missions depending upon concerns for danger. We have taken into consideration the violence in an urban setting or an outbreak of hepatitis within the street community. We have wrestled with the potential hazard of crossing a drug warfare zone in the boarder towns of Mexico. Add transportation and housing to the mix, and we start to realize that a mission trip for students is a costly and precarious endeavor.

As someone who thinks short-term mission trips is the bread and butter of student ministry, I have come to the conclusion that these potential dangers are part of the process of helping students (and parents) to live outside their comfort zone. Putting our students in a totally foreign and partially threatening context softens their hearts and opens their eyes to see the working of God in new and fresh ways.

However, after leading dozens of trips over the years, I am starting to realize that while the surface safety issues are real and must be taken seriously, there actually is a larger hidden peril lurking just below the surface; which cements in our students a false view of missions and of themselves.

Every year we ask students to fill out an application. One of the questions has something to do with why they want to participate in this trip. And with almost 100% unanimity the answer is, "We want to help those less fortunate than ourselves." Don't get me wrong. This is an awesome value; one that is at the heart of the Christian faith. Those of us with power and resources are to care for the orphan and the widow; for the poor and oppressed.

However, when we unintentionally frame missions as us - wealthy suburbanites - helping those poor people, we continue to instill in our students that they have their acts together and are "above" others. I am not

saying the suburban church is the problem, or that we need to beat down our own context or culture and make students feel awful for the blessings and resources they have. The suburban culture is just that: A culture. But when we engage in missions, we must consider and celebrate the culture to which we are going. We have to help students see that we are guests in another culture, not superior to those whom we visit.

Our students are naturally self-absorbed and limited in their worldview. And when we set up our trips as us coming to save the day, their foundational worldview doesn't have the chance to be challenged. And this is the true danger of student ministry short-term missions. We take one of the most significant spiritual experiences of their high school careers and actually solidify some of the worst of suburban thinking. Missions is not suburban kids with their wealth and privilege helping the poor. This is the jeopardy in compassion ministries.

One of the best books I have read on mission for those of us leading trips from a suburban context is When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself by Brian Fikkert. This book is a must read for anyone leading a trip. My biggest take away from my read of the book is that we must change our view of wealth and poverty. All of us are wealthy in some ways and poor in others. The challenge is to identify the ways in which we are wealthy and the ways in which we are poor. Once we have done this, we can come into any context – specifically, impoverished ones - and easily become partners who share resources. We then have a real chance for cultural exchange instead of seeing ourselves as superiors above the poor people we help.

As the fundraising, logistics and training for our annual short-term trips are gearing up, there are many practicalities we must take into account. But it takes intentional work and training to break through and break down the traditional mindset of many suburban students and leaders. Here are four values to consider as you plan your short-term missions trip this year:

- 1) **Short term missions is about recognizing God is already at work wherever it is we are going.** The God we serve so loves the entire world. Our short-term missions trip destination is already loved by God; and God already has people in place doing great ministry there. This immediately takes the focus off of ourselves as well as

what we bring; and opens our eyes to the spiritual reality that God is alive and at work long before we showed up.

2) **Short term missions is about partnering not helping.** We now have the privilege of coming alongside the people whom God has called to love that community for the long haul. When we see our role as partners, an exchange of blessings occurs. We become givers and receivers rather than saviors. For this to be successful, we must find organizations not only established and committed to that particular community, but organizations we can trust. The more you trust an organization, the more you can truly partner; celebrate all that God has done before you arrive; is doing while you are there; and will continue to do when you leave.

3) **Short-term missions is about student development.** There is little long-term benefit our students can bring to the mission field. We are only there for a week and often have little knowledge of the culture and language. At best, we are a blessing to the organization/missionaries with whom we partner. We get to use this experience to shape and transform the students to whom we are called to be missionaries. Meaning, we must help shape this trip in a way that broadens their view of ministry, not affirm their privileged worldview. Their spiritual health and development is our chief concern.

If we are taking students on short-term mission trips we must clarify what we are doing. It is true, many of us come from churches with significant resources and we want to partner with the heart of God in doing ministries of compassion. But we cannot solidify the thinking that financial resources are the definition of God's blessings. Wealth does not make us superior. We cannot let our students live into this false and dangerous reality.

Our task in short-term missions is to help our students understand how big God's heart is for the world, to partner with those who are already there, and to be a blessing for the short time our paths cross. We all have wealth and we all have poverty. By helping our students identify and articulate where they are wealthy and where they are poor allows them to truly be partners in ministry and cultural exchange.

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Can you love Jesus and Halloween?

It is impossible to walk through a retail store these days and not be overwhelmed with Halloween. Since the beginning of September, aisles of orange and black decorations, bags of candy and costumes have been calling out to my children; building excitement and expectation for their dream holiday. For my kids, Halloween is a simple holiday that involves their two favorite things: candy and dressing up. For Christians, however, Halloween seems to be a bit more complicated.

No matter how you slice it, Halloween has a dark and seedy past. Its history can be traced to a Roman festival that involved worshiping the goddess of fruits and seeds; a pagan festival of the dead or a Celtic festival celebrating the end of summer. The latter isn't bad. However, the celebration of the spirit world coming close to the living world is. It's difficult to encourage recognizing a holiday having many touch points with the occult. How can Christians get behind a holiday that, at best...OK, there isn't anything we can get behind in the history of Halloween.

However, as bad as it seems, there might be another way we can look at Halloween - and I don't mean to pretend we are publicly against it while we quietly celebrate it with our friends and family (like a good wine). I think there is a way we can celebrate and even promote Halloween in a way that honors God and might even bring the kingdom of God closer to your neighborhood.

Before you call my supervising pastor and get me fired, humor me for one minute. How many of us Christians have Christmas trees as part of our family tradition and home decoration? If you Google "Christmas Tree Pagan," you will find there are more than 3,000,000 sites.

A quick view of these sites will afford many stories and traditions in which evergreens were used in worship and celebration as a symbol of life in the midst of death. In ancient Rome and Egypt, there were traditions of tree worship and burning sacred logs. The most worrisome history is that of Odin, a German god who required sacrifices to a sacred Oak tree. Even though the history of the Christmas tree is shady, it has been recast in a Christian light so that by the 18th and 19th centuries, the Christmas tree had become a fully accepted part of the Christmas celebration.

Christians transitioned the Tree of Odin to a tree with some vague inferences to Christianity so that now all is well with decorating a Christmas tree. The goal was to take a cultural norm with pagan symbols and use it to tell the Christian story; similar to what the apostle Paul did when he used culture to proclaim truth (Acts 17:22-23). We need to do something similar with Halloween; instead, simply transitioning Halloween to a Harvest Festival to make it more tolerable might be a missed opportunity.

If our cultural context had many touch points to spirit and ancestor worship, goddess worship or occult practices, celebrating Halloween might be a tough sell. However, in the context here - suburban America - Halloween has nothing to do with anything except candy and playing make-believe. The primary people who are concerned about the darker issues are Christians. Because pagan worship has nothing to do with the world in which most Americans live and because Halloween is observed more as a secular holiday with zero spiritual overtones, maybe we could embrace it and use it as a place for Christians to impact their communities.

Halloween actually could be our holiday; a holiday of hospitality. With hospitality being one of the Christian virtues that is fading away, Halloween could be the holiday during which we embrace our neighbors; when we get to break down some of the built up barriers between us and those people who live on our street; when we get to be a blessing to them. In a time when we are less likely to be known by people in our own neighborhood and our neighbors are less likely to be known by us, Halloween could be the perfect holiday to rebuild that bridge.

Halloween could be our holiday to love our neighbors as ourselves. It could be the holiday for Christians to express the love and grace of God throughout our neighborhoods and communities. If you haven't celebrated Halloween in a while, here are a couple of ideas to make a holiday with strong Christian overtones:

- 1) **On a normal day, no one from your street comes to your house.** Halloween is the one day when the entire neighborhood potentially could come to your door. The one day your neighbors mill around in street is the one day your lights are off and the door is locked. That doesn't seem quite right. So, be home. Turn your lights on. Answer the door.

2) **If everyone is coming to your house, why not be the house with the reputation for the best one to visit for trick-or-treating?** Instead of the house that gives away raisins or toothbrushes—or even tracts—your house can be known as the house that gives away full-sized Snickers. Three decades later, I can still remember the stingy houses and the very generous houses I visited as a child.

3) **As a youth worker, this holiday can even be a blessing to your students.** Get your kids off the streets and put them to work by helping you make your house amazing. Have a party for them in your home. While they are there, have them decorate, pass out candy, do card tricks, whatever. Simply by being there, your house transitions into a place of life and celebration of life.

Halloween is the one holiday when your neighborhood actually comes to you. Instead of running away from this holiday, maybe we should embrace it, redeem it, and make it our own. What story are you telling to your neighbors when they knock on your door? What are the values you are sharing with them? Jesus came to give us life and life abundantly. Halloween is the perfect time to share this abundant life. How great would it be if your house is the one that celebrates life; if your house was the house the neighbors' kids couldn't wait to get to for trick-or-treat?

Let us recapture the value of hospitality and show off this abundant life we have in Christ! King-sized Snickers for everyone!

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We finally have a generation that has no idea why we celebrate Christmas

I know it is nothing new that Christmas has become secularized. From the Happy Holiday wars to the removal of the nativity scenes, the reason we celebrate Christmas has finally left the building. I had an epiphany the other night as I was driving around with my kids doing some Christmas shopping while listening to my favorite Christmas album, John Denver and the Muppets' Christmas. (It is actually a rough album, but has a high sentimental value for me.)

As we listened to the story of Alphie, I was once again reminded of the wide variety of meaning people have put on Christmas. Well, way back in 1979 we get some strange theology from John Denver and his enormous love for the outdoors combined with a cultural understanding of Christmas.

What stood out to me was the fact that John Denver is not a Christian by any means. If anything he was a pantheist. But because he grew up in a culture that was generally "Christian" he knew enough that if you are talking about Christmas, you are talking about the Son of God, peace on earth, and the brotherhood of man.

That was in 1979. Now, over 30 years have gone by and our cultural understanding has increasingly become secular. No news there. But think of the students with whom you work. Think of their peers. Unlike John Denver, they are growing up in a culture that has absolutely zero space for Jesus at Christmas. So much so, He isn't even missed.

Of course our "Christian" kids know why we celebrate Christmas and can regurgitate some of the facts about the original Christmas story and the meaning of it. But even our smartest, most spiritual, Christian kids are missing huge chunks of the story. Their friends, the students to whom we want to reach with the gospel, have no understanding of Jesus and what happened on Christmas. To get to the why is a gigantic leap.

As adults who work with students, it is easy to think they have a strong cultural understanding of Christmas that is becoming secular. But I would argue that the students outside our churches have absolutely no idea why we celebrate Christmas. In our context, maybe one percent of students have been to a Christian church in the last six months. A large part of our

population has a smaller and smaller understanding of the most amazing event in all of history.

Gone are the days when secular artists include songs about Jesus in their Christmas albums. The ones that do, like my main man Justin B., simply uses religious imagery to express his over-the-top infatuation with his latest fling.

This is not “the sky is falling” observation. It is simply an admission that the Jesus train has left the building. If we are going to communicate the Gospel to a context who has no cultural understanding of Christmas, incarnation, humility, sin, redemption or salvation, we must be incredibly wise in both the world and the spirit - if we are going to introduce this next generation to the King of Kings who became flesh on Christmas morning, to usher in a new kingdom, a new way to live both now and forever more!

Merry Christmas!

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Are bikinis sinful?

> What Are Your Summer Bathing Suit Rules?

Now that summer is here, it is time for pool parties, lake barbeques, and beach activities. As a youth ministry professional, always one question seems to rise to the surface: what is appropriate summer beach attire? Every youth ministry throughout the country has different rules and regulations when it comes to what acceptable and appropriate attire at recreational water events. All of the rules seem to surround the ladies and their swimsuit options. Bikini? Tankini? One Piece? Or my favorite: A potato sack.

Because our country is large and our micro-cultures are so varied, the rules we set up become “just the way we do things.” Many of us haven’t really thought through all of the reasons and cultural issues surrounding our decisions. We don’t even get push back anymore because “it is just how we do things.”

This method of setting up guidelines is perfectly fine with me. But the problem is, when the larger body of Christ comes together for some summer fun, there seems to always be some conflict. Whether it is summer camp, a joint camping trip, or a denominational gathering, issues arise when one set of rules bumps up against another.

Will our pool be a bikini-free zone? For the churches making strict rules, their students are ready. Even though the girls in this youth group wear bikinis to every summer function, they dutifully bust out their “youth group” swimsuit for this event. But sure enough, some other youth group, who seems to have no morals, allows their girls to wear bikinis. Now you have trouble! “Why do we have to wear these ugly swim suits when those girls get to wear those hip bikinis?”

> Purity or Freedom?

If you have ever been around a planning meeting for a joint event, you know hours of conversation can swirl around the swimsuit issue. In my world, it seems to be always framed in terms of modesty. We value modesty; that group doesn’t. As a discipleship issue, that group needs to

see their sin and embrace it. While I do agree that propriety is an important value, I think there may be another way to approach the bathing suit issue.

Instead of the “one-piece” group pointing their fingers of shame and disgust at the “bikini” group, wanting them to mature in their faith and values, maybe the discipleship should come from the “bikini” group.

Check out Romans 14:1-23. This is the passage where Paul talks about accepting their fellow Christians who are “weak in the faith.” One person believes it is okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and another will only eat vegetables. He affirms that each of us personally will be held accountable for our decisions. God judges us; so we don’t have to judge each other. In fact, the stance that Paul argues is not of finger pointing, but of self-sacrifice. “Don’t tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble.” (vs 20)

There is nothing wrong “in themselves”. To the pure all things are pure. It is culture that defines what sin is. Playing cards, drinking beer, smoking a cigar, and wearing bikinis are only sinful if the context you are in has made them sinful.

> **Clothing Is Culturally Optional:**

It is kind of a trip to think about clothing and modesty as culturally defined. As we look around the world and throughout history we know this to be true. What was acceptable beachwear in the 1920’s is vastly different than what our most conservative sisters and brothers accept at their pool parties. It is common for women in tribes of Africa or in the Jungles of Brazil to go topless. In their culture bearing it all isn’t shameful or sinful. It is simply their culture.

For the Yanamomo people in the Brazilian Rainforest, the men are completely nude except for a small string they tie to their junk. If they come out in public without that string, they have brought shame to themselves and are in sin. If one of these Yanamomo people becomes a Christian, they are not supposed to immediately cover their privates and wear dockers. When they are in their context they dress in a way that won’t cause others to stumble. So the string stays.

If my Christian Yanamomo brother comes to church with me, and shares on a Sunday morning, the string will not cut it. It is not the string, but the culture that determines if something is sinful or not. But because my brother loves God and God's people, he will gladly dress appropriately for our context because he doesn't want to cause any of our people to stumble.

This same principle can be used for just about anything, and now must be used with bikinis. You see, the modesty group is actually the weaker brother in this passage of scripture. Their cultural issues are what cause them to see bikinis as sinful. The hard part is, the modesty group by nature of being the modesty group sees themselves as the true Christians, the keepers of the faith, and pure and holy ones. But in reality, they are the ones in danger of stumbling.

> **Another Approach:**

It is perfectly acceptable to want a common dress code for joint events that include swimming. But it is a mistake to make the reasons be that those poor girls with no morals or concern for modesty the focus of the issue. For most students, today's bikinis are not scandalous in any way. It is the common dress of the day. And for those who live in beach communities, it is a way of life.

The real issue is, bikinis cause the weaker sisters and brothers - mostly brothers - to stumble. The discipleship that needs to happen is for youth workers to walk with their bikini-clad sisters to help them understand the vast variety of the body of Christ. Part of the call of being a follower of Christ is that we love another and serve one another. Included with serving means dying to our own freedoms for the sake of the weaker sister or brother.

The next time you get together to plan your event and you are worried about dress code around the pool, it would be helpful if the tone was a little less judgmental about those people, and to own our status as the weaker Christians. Then in grace and humility we can ask those with more freedom to graciously give up some of their freedom for our sake. This posture would dramatically change the conversation and might even lead to some good 'ol fashioned discipleship.

Speedos will always be sinful!

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Does a changing culture require a different slant on the Gospel?

> The Gospel is Dynamic

One of the most amazing things about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, it has proven to be good news to every culture, in every time, and in every context. If you think about it, this is an amazing feat for any religion. Yet Christianity has done just that.

Christianity is not based on national identity or cultural mandates. It is a religion that offers good news to everyone. As you study how this has worked itself out, you notice the gospel story has subtle to gigantic differences as you compare what was emphasized in differing Christian communities such as pre-Constantine Mediterranean, to the height of Papal authority in the middle ages, to the reformation. And this is just the western branch of Christendom.

How much more diverse does the Gospel appear when you compare the differences from the hyper-spirituality of the Congo to liberation theology in Central America? The underground churches in China have a very different expression of the Gospel than the Conservative religious right of the United States.

Once we recognize the gospel is a dynamic story with flexibility to truly speak good news to the thin places of need in a culture, we can begin to think more creatively about what is the crisis our students are facing and what is the good news that addresses it. In order to move forward with reaching these students for Jesus and sharing the gospel story with them, we must first understand our context. We must explore the past, the present and look towards the future.

> Part 1: The Past

But in order to figure out where we are, and before we can move forward, it is important to look back into our history and see some of the major cultural shifts and the church's response. For our purposes, the farthest back we need to go is for our modern memory - the Gospel that has shaped for many

of the boomers who are now in positions of power and leadership in the church. This is the Billy Graham Gospel.

Billy Graham and Bill Bright were among the leaders of pioneering a gospel story that was simple, clear, and straight to the point. It truly was good news for a generation of people who had grown up with a religious worldview but had now clear path to connect the dots towards a regenerated life in Christ. They were rebellious and needed justification from consequences of their sin.

The Gospel was a simple outline summing up the four main themes in scripture. These four themes came to be known as the four laws. The preemies of them were rooted in foundational logic and a common understanding of truth. The introduction of the four laws says, “Just as there are physical laws that govern the universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern our relationship with God.”

> **The Gospel as the Four Laws**

With clarity and simplicity the four laws can be presented:

Law 1: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

Law 2: Man is sinful and separated from God, so we cannot know Him personally or experience His love.

Law 3: Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him alone we can know God personally and experience God’s love.

Law 4: We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know God personally and experience His love.

> **Why were they so effective?**

This version of the Gospel was highly effective and brought about a significant revival in the 70’s. It is the version of the Gospel still most closely associated with Evangelical Christianity. Even though these four laws are not clearly stated by Jesus as how to enter into His Kingdom, it has been the Gospel upon which the church has relied here in Northern America for the better part of 60 years.

But have you ever stopped to think about why this version of the Gospel was so effective?

Think about the post World War II context with its rigid social rules and norms. Think of Leave it to Beaver. Everything was made right, and had order and rules. The Judeo-Christian story was part of the culture, and the Church was still the center of social and cultural life in the community. Sermons were even printed in the New York Times every Sunday.

With this emphasis on religion and order as cultural values, the crisis became one of rebellion. Many of us have heard the definition of sin as missing the mark. This is an important illustration in a culture with a common understanding of order and law, and could agree with what missing the mark meant.

As the chaos of the 60's erupted with its emphasis on rebellion and freedom, it made sense that there had now become an established thin place to communicate the Gospel. Many of the boomers grew up with structure, order, and rules. When they exchanged it for rebellion, earthly consequences followed. But because there was a common set of rules and norms, it was easy to find a place for the gospel to be shared.

There was a common understanding of God. There was a common understanding and experience of rebellion and its consequences. Here came a Gospel that covered sin and washed away those consequences. The Gospel was the person of Jesus Christ.

> Why has this Gospel become less effective?

This Gospel used to have the power to fill stadiums with thousands of people coming forward; one which used to be shared with just about any stranger on the street with a high chance for success; seems to have less and less impact, has lost some of its umph.

We no longer have a common Judeo-Christian culture with shared values, laws and rules. If you don't believe me, ask any teenager an ethical question and you will quickly see there is no truth with a capital T, but only situation ethics with the foundation built on minimizing their consequences. With little common agreement on the nature of truth, the nature of God and the nature of sin, the four spiritual laws don't answer any of the key questions being asked or solve any of the felt crises.

Because the Gospel is dynamic and malleable to every cultural context, I think the gospel of the four spiritual laws with the emphasis on justification

as the good news for our rebellion is fading in exchange for a gospel that is more relevant in addressing our current generation's crisis.

> **Justification for our rebellion used to work.**

There was a time in our not so distant past where the gospel of justification as the good news for our rebellion was a compelling and effective strategy in connecting people to Jesus. For the better part of 50 years this was the staple of Evangelical Christianity.

But as the children of the boomers grew up, many noticed this gospel of defining sin as rebellion and missing the mark simply lead to a legalistic gospel of sin management. If we are rebels and Jesus now saves us from the consequences of our sin, then sanctification was getting on board with "Christian Culture", locking down those crazy behaviors and being nice. (I know this is a very simplistic assessment. But I will take my angsty straw man and jump in line with my fellow Gen Xers who began to tell a subtly different, yet much more, culturally relevant version of the gospel for this new generation.)

Many Gen Xers who saw the white washed lives and big box churches offering a simple gospel which appeared to simply offer fire insurance, were longing for a more transformational story that wasn't so binary in its approach. In or out, secular or sacred - there had to be a broader and more compelling story.

And sure enough, pioneers such as Brian McLaren, Tim Keller, and Rob Bell (just to name a few of the superstars) began to paint a picture of the Gospel that was truly good news for the Gen Xers and beyond.

> **Part 2: The Present**

Where the Gospel used to be the good news of justification for our rebellion, there has now become new crises in need of good news. For many Gen Xers, their story has been one of destruction. But it isn't the sort of destruction caused by rebellion. It is the kind of destruction that is the fruit of rebellion.

As a side note: This is not to say all boomers were rebels or all Xers were wrecked. But it has become the common narrative of the generation.

For many Gen Xers, there is a genuine feeling of brokenness. There was once something that was good; then, through sin, death and destruction came to be. And since brokenness is the crisis, the good news is, through Jesus Christ we are healed and redeemed.

The death and destruction that has marred our lives and relationships does not have to be the end. Jesus comes and offers us transformation and healing to make the wrongs right.

> I love the Gospel of healing and redemption!

This narrative is so prevalent. It is like the air we breathe. We are all about the redemptive story. We love that God has made the world good; and sin entered the world through Adam; and with sin came death and brokenness. Then God began his redemptive work through the Jewish people and ultimately through Jesus Christ. And in him our wounds are healed.

Instead of God simply annihilating the entire world because of their rebellion, many Xers see that God is redeeming creation and inviting the redeemed to be part of the process. This is partly why social justice is such a significant part of our story. Christians are not passive people simply trying to get people from hell to heaven. We are a redeemed people participating in the ever-expanding Kingdom of God.

This is my context, my peeps. I get that things used be good, and now they suck! And Jesus takes my brokenness and heals it, redeems it. This is the good news!

> Yes the Four Laws still work, but work differently:

As you may have read from my other posts, I am all about altar calls; all about presenting the Gospel. But what has changed is the definition of sin when presenting it. Now sin is our brokenness not our rebellion, and the Gospel is healing and redemption instead of justification. No matter how we tweak the definitions, there is still a world in desperate need of Jesus. We are invited by faith to respond.

Sin used to be seen as missing the mark, rebellion, behaviors deserving of punishment. But in our current context, this definition has transitioned to

mean broken. We are sinful and broken. Brokenness severs our relationship with God.

It is Jesus who offers healing and redemption through Jesus Christ. It is a Gospel. It is a Gospel that requires a response. What has changed is our understanding of what the crisis is. For most “younger adults” we get that the crisis has transitioned from rebellion to brokenness.

I hope this makes some sense and gives you a little more grace for the generation who has come before, and understand the Gospel in a different way than you. In the same way, can you even get your head around the fact that our students have a different worldview and a different crisis they are facing?

> Can you get your head around the concept that our students don't think they are broken?

This version of the Gospel is a home run for people in their 20's - 40's. But I am noticing a challenging new trend. This new trend is, among our students there is now no more self reflection; no more brokenness.

As you interact with your students you are probably as horrified as I am that they have absolutely no understanding of sin. They live in an amoral culture and if there is no defined morality, how can they be rebels? How can they miss the mark? This trend has been happening for quite some time. But what has taken me aback is, this current group of students don't even see themselves as broken.

Go to *Youtube* and watch Lady GaGa's video, “Born This Way”

Now I get that she is weird and many students would not admit to being inline with her. But as you talk with them and truly listen, you will see that this song is actually their worldview.

Our students are beautiful and unique. Whatever we might classify as sin or brokenness they actually classify as badges of honor that simply make them more beautiful and unique. When they give their testimonies, have you noticed they almost always talk about having no regrets, and all their experiences have simply shaped them into the person they are today?

While we might get that our students are rebellious and broken, I am saying our students don't see it. It is like arguing that a 19-year-old college freshman boy is sleeping with everyone in his dorm because he is truly

lonely, insecure, and trying to fill some God shaped hole with the wrong thing. While those may be deep inner longings, his felt need is that he is actually just horny. We know there is a sin problem, but unless we can tap into his felt crisis, there is little to no chance of the Gospel truly being good news to this current generation. (Wasn't that a colorful example?)

I know you probably disagree with me. But imagine trying to have the conversation with your parents or grandparents about the redemptive story we are called into. If they have any old school, evangelical roots, they think we have gone soft because we are all about the journey and not getting people saved! This current generation has transitioned the gospel focus. Why can't it transition again?

> **Part 3: The future:**

Our students are not broken or rebellious. They are Unique!

As I wrote about in Part 1 and in Part 2, our culture continues to change. As it does, we must be proactive in finding the thin places where the Gospel and culture connect.

For our parents and grandparents, the crisis used to be rebellion. The good news was justification. For us, the crisis is brokenness, and the good news is healing and redemption. But for our students, what is their crisis? Especially since they don't see themselves as being rebellious or broken.

Since there is no common morality, there can't really be rebellion. And since there is not a very good picture of how the world should be, they have no sense they are broken. And you can see this worked out when you actually talk with them and hear their stories.

The things we would classify as sin, rebellion, or brokenness are not things of which they are ashamed. In fact, they are badges of honor that give them street cred among their peers and make them feel more unique, more beautiful. They have no regrets! Everything they have done and experienced has made them the unique and beautiful person they are today.

> **Part 2) The Future**

If there is no brokenness or rebellion, where is the crisis? Where is the thin

place in this current culture? What is the crisis for which the Gospel is good news? Because the truth is, our students are in crisis!!

While they may not be able to articulate their own rebellion or brokenness, we can see the impact of sin on their lives and it is devastating. But we must not take the easy way out and simply put our worldview and experiences on them and make them conform to our language. We know they are sinful and messed up, but they don't know that. So instead of hammering away with words and a worldview that is totally foreign to them, why not actually find that place where their felt needs rise to the surface and have a touch point with Jesus.

And I believe the crisis our students are facing is one of abandonment and isolation. And this is a thin place where there truly is good news found in Jesus Christ.

> **Our students are abandoned and isolated**

This is basically the premise of Chap Clark's book, Hurt

Students have been totally abandoned by the adult world and left to fend for themselves. Now students have figured out how to pacify adults into thinking they are okay by simply telling them what they want to hear.

Have you ever noticed how students are incredibly quick in coming up with answers to your questions? They have mastered the art of psychoanalysis. They know what you want them to know and they have figured out if they give it to you, you will let them get back to their real life. Because they have been conditioned that we adults don't really care about them; therefore, their reality is this underworld hidden from adults and lived among their peers.

But in this world beneath, there is not grace and kindness, warmth or hospitality. It is a dog- eat-dog world, survival of the fittest, lord of the flies. And in order to survive in this world it is about finding your cluster of close friends, locking arms, and doing life. But if, God-forbid, you ruffle the feathers of this cluster, you are out! This sort of bullying, ostracizing, and alienation from peers and oblivious adults is devastating to the souls of our students.

Because of this reality, their worlds have become increasingly smaller and their place in it is fragile at best. This crisis is so real, it is actually palatable. Our students have no home, no family, no place of refuge, no identity, no purpose larger than their cluster of friends. They are isolated and alienated from true community, true love, and true purpose.

(Of course this is a dramatic picture and doesn't account for every student's story. But I think it is the cultural story with which most students can identify).

> **The good news is, they are invited to belong:**

If the crisis can be clarified as one of isolation and alienation, then Jesus Christ offers incredible news to this group of students. As the scriptures teach: Where once we were no people, now we are the people of God! Students are actually invited into the family of God; for whoever receives Him, to those who believe in his name, He gave the right to become children of God.

If you think about it, most of what works in our student ministry is creating a sense of community. The students who are most committed are the ones who are most connected. This is the case because we are creating a heavenly version of community every Wednesday night.

When students show up they are noticed, welcomed, and valued. It is the place where they get to put the drama of home life and school friends away - even for a couple of hours - and simply rest in a place that is home!

I am sure you do plenty of really great things, you are the most amazing speaker, your worship team has a new CD, and your numbers are through the roof. But I bet if you did a survey of what your students value most about your youth group, it is the sense of community. It is because youth group is actually part of the good news to our students. It is the answer to their feelings of isolation and alienation.

> **There must be an initiation rite**

But by simply letting them experience the love of the youth group community as an honored guest does not get them where they need to go. It is like being an honored guest at your friend's home. No matter how close

you are, how welcomed you are, you are still not family. At some point you have to go home and don't get to go with them to Hawaii on their family vacation.

But the good news to our students is, they are not simply honored guests. They are invited to become actual family! To belong to the body of Christ! This invitation requires action. On our end it requires a clear invitation to this new reality. And on their end it requires a clear decision.

As more and more of my peers are giving up alter calls and punctuated salvation in favor of the journey towards Christ, our students are getting confused and lost. They will not figure it out by osmosis. They are barely figuring out their abstract thinking; so leaving it all to nuance is no bueno! We must get over our own issues so we can properly serve the needs of our students.

Our students need clear signposts, clear opportunities, and a clear invitation. They are not to be honored guests in the house of God - but to stand up, and by faith be adopted into the family of God and take their place as daughters and sons of the King. For they used to be no people, but now they are the people of God!

And as the people of God, they have an opportunity to partner in the family business of expanding the Kingdom of God. Standing up for injustice, participating in the ministry of reconciliation, and bringing light to the darkness.

> Where do we go from here?

These are just my thoughts as I have watched the student culture continue to shift from under me and the older stories of the gospel make less and less sense. Whether this is the right paradigm or not doesn't matter. The reality is, student culture is undergoing another seismic shift, and we have an opportunity to be proactive in our quest to contextualize the gospel in a relevant and practical way.

Contextualization has been the bread and butter of missions for 2000 years. As youth culture changes, how must the gospel change so we can help our students connect to Christ? I think the crisis is alienation and therefore the good news is belonging.

What do you think the current crisis is among our students? What do you think the good news is for them?

> **Section 3** +Discerning your
students

What is your view of social status on a high school campus

It is not 1985 anymore: Back in the 80's *Young Life* was the premiere organization to reach students for Christ. They were a corrective force for the church and the key organization to completely transition how churches do student ministry. Because of the influence of *Young Life*, the church has been able to expand their demographic from a closed group of church kids, into youth groups who are just as missional and inviting as many *Young Life* clubs. It seems the institutional church is always slow to change; including their methodologies. Since this is true, I wonder if we continue holding on to a key ministry philosophy *Young Life* had back in the 80's.

This philosophy was simple: Win the popular and leader kids = Win the campus. (I have no idea if this is still *Young Life's* main strategy, but it used to be and was incredibly effective).

Over the last ten years, scholars like Chap Clark and others have deconstructed the social landscape on high school campuses, and have found that the stereotypical model of status has changed. Gone are the days where there was a top tier popular student who was recognized as such by the entire school. Gone are the days where those outside the popular circle longed to be seen by and included in it.

In his research, Chap Clark identified that instead of this one unified social strata, there are now small groups he calls clusters. These clusters, made up of six to ten students are autonomous groups with their own hierarchy and power structure. What is amazing is, most clusters could care less about the other clusters and their strata found within them.

If you observe your student ministry, I am sure you will find this same social dynamic at work. There are not one or two people to whom the entire group look up and want to emulate. In fact, there are clusters - groupings of students who are connected - and these clusters are independent from the others.

It's quite noticeable when you have an event. Although there may be plenty of people there - even plenty of popular kids - if no one from that student's cluster is present, they are out and feel isolated/alone.

> **Time to step up and change our game plan:**

I find myself running a full decade behind what is relevant. I realize I can't simply reach out to, and pour into, my leader kids who would have been at the top of the social ladder from when I was in high school. By instinct, going to these kids and trying to get them to be nice to the other students is giving me much less bang for my buck when it comes to relational ministry and reaching out to a larger number of students.

My new strategy is to look at all the cluster groups of which my students are a part and map them out. As I have done this I have found some surprising results. Some complete clusters are present at youth group and are having a blast because their peeps are all here, all together, all the time.

Other students are the lone representatives of their cluster at school, so they feel incredibly out of place at youth group. And everyone else fills in the middle.

If I want to reach more students for Christ, I must be willing to be diverse in my relational efforts and in my execution of our student ministry. When I favor one cluster over another, I dramatically limit my effectiveness to the entire group.

I need to reach out to each individual cluster, affirm their cluster, their group, and their passions. What *Young Life* proved to be true in the 80's is still true in these clusters. If you can win the head of these clusters, hook in the top of their social strata, it is like shooting fish in a barrel to reach out to and gather the rest of the cluster.

> **My Summer Goal:**

This summer, that is my goal. I am going to reach out to, goof off with, and spend time doing the things each of these diverse clusters like doing. I am going to seek out the top of each cluster and invite them to partner with me and to reach out to their friends who already love and respect them. I want to expand my student leadership base to include students from all these diverse groups. Slowly but surely our youth group will look a little less like

a monochromatic group of people striving to be close to the popular people, and a little more like the diverse body of Christ we are called to be.

How do your students break down socially? Who are kingpins? Who are on the fringe? Who do you spend your time pouring into and reaching out to? Are you still living into the 80's model of popularity and leadership or are you maximizing the reality of clusters?

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Lets be honest about every guy's "struggle."

Not your typical gathering of High School Guys:

Last night we had our Manly Mecca kick off! The Manly Mecca is like the men's ministry to our youth group. It is a gathering of high school guys who meet once a month on a Friday Night. During this time, we have one of the guys share his testimony, do some sort of adventure, and then pass around the "whack jar."

It is the "whack jar" portion of the evening I wanted to share with you in this post. In a similar vein to the "sear jar" the "whack jar" is a jar that students (and leaders) pay into every time they whack off. I am not sure what the correct term for your context is, but this is what we call it. My strongest kids pay only a couple of bucks, and the horniest drop \$20. Everyone still divides by five or so, but everyone owns up to their struggle and their attempt at victory. So, once a month we gather and goof off, talk about deep things, and hold each other accountable in our pursuit of sexual purity.

You might be asking yourself, "Isn't there shame in this sort of public confession?" The answer is yes. For all the joking around there is about it and for the assumption they all struggle, there is something awful about owning publicly how much one actually does struggle with it. But because of the total ethos of our ministry, it works. And we have made one significant change in how we approach sexual purity, masturbation, and porn that has dramatically altered the course of the conversation. It is this one simple assumption:

EVERY HIGH SCHOOL GUY WHACKS OFF!

I have been so comfortable for so long couching this conversation in "struggling." This is like some weak sauce way of saying, "I try really hard to not whack off." But the actual confession of and honesty to the frequency of - and the grace for those in the middle of this - gets left behind. So, with one fell swoop we stopped saying we struggle with lust and own the fact that all high school guys whack off.

If we can own this reality, we can move our ministries away from simply sin management to actual freedom and healing. It is a crime to simply try to

get our boys to lock it down. We need to actually talk about pornography in Youth Ministry. If we admitted that whacking off is simply a symptom of our sin and brokenness, we can be more honest about where the problem really lies.

When we have these conversations with our guys all the sudden I move from students admitting to “struggling with lust” to owning their loneliness, boredom, apathy, insecurities, stress, etc. And when we help our students understand why they give into whacking off, they can actually find healing and hopefully move past this habit.

Because we are honest with the reality of the role masturbation plays in the life of our high school guys, we are able to use prayer and the spirit of God to heal the root causes; and the playful shame of the whack jar to help them change their habits.

As we start our new year and ask our young men to pursue sexual purity, what if we lead them in this by modeling it for them. Here are three things we can model in our own lives:

- 1) **Get an accountability partner.** Many of us have had these guys in our past but as we have gotten older felt like it was some sort of admission to failure by continuing these relationships. Get over yourselves and realize how high the stakes are. Get someone in your life to whom you can confess your sin, will pray for you and help you walk the straight an narrow.

- 2) **Deal with the root cause.** We have spent our entire lives trying to manage this sin. Let us get in touch with the Holy Spirit and ask God to reveal the reasons we wrestle, the triggers which cause us to fail. Some of it is lame habit, but some of it is much deeper. It is time to grow up and model spiritual humility and transformation. Is it loneliness, insecurities, fear of rejection, issues in your marriage, who knows? God does. Let God have access to these subterranean issues and be willing to share this process with your students. They need a model of someone who is continually working out their faith and continually pursuing holiness, and making space for God to mold and transform them.

- 3) **Give up some of your freedom.** Gone are the days where a simple internet blocker or XXXchurch software on the family computer in the living room prevents us from jumping down the black hole. Our phone

is the gateway to porn for just about every guy I know. If this is the case, lock it down. You don't even have to give up your phone, just a few minor inconveniences. Ask your accountability partner to turn off Safari, YouTube, and any 17+ apps. Did you know that any browser will get you into trouble on line? (Of course you did!) So for the sake of your job, your ministry to students, and for your very own walk with Jesus, give up your freedom of the internet on your phone and wait 'til you get home or ask someone near you about Googling some random fact. You will not miss it.

Ok, I hope that wasn't too awkward. We must be honest with where are students really are so we can actually help them move forward in their walk with Jesus and get a handle on their habitual sin. Maybe we could use a little more honesty with our "struggle" so we, too, can be the Godly men that we have been called to be!

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A unique glimpse into the hearts of students

Last week we took a bunch of students to winter camp. On Saturday night, they had an opportunity to identify an area of their life they wanted to surrender to Jesus. Here are their un-edited responses:

- *Bringing peace and love to my family, to solve their issues with each other.*
- *Life, friendship, moving on, problems, love.*
- *I'm willing to surrender to God my refusal to forgive myself for all the sins I've done. if God gave me grace I can forgive myself too. I'm willing to surrender my personal looks as well. I am beautiful.*
- *Mistreating others. Not listening. Ignoring those in pain.*
- *I surrender my life plans. You are in control and have a plan for me beyond what I can imagine.*
- *I want to surrender the loneliness I feel at home and be able to open up to family.*
- *My flaws, insecurities, and future.*
- *I have no mess.*
- *My performance. Tomorrow. My daily life.*
- *Everything.*
- *I surrender my heart to you.*
- *I want to be free from all impieties and have a fulfilling relationship.*
- *Anything.*
- *I absolutely, positively must show grace to others. Ditch the junk, prioritize, do I really really care about these things. Make time for Him.*
- *Forgive my brother for leaving.*
- *My sin.*
- *I need help. Please...*
- *Control.*
- *My anger and hatred for me and everyone around me.*
- *My lies.*

- *Performance, popularity, personal looks. My obsession/want of a relationship.*
- *I need to completely trust in God to guide me, guard my heart and take my life where it's meant to go. I surrender my pride.*
- *Relationships with God.*
- *Fighting with my mother.*
- *Blaming myself for my sister's death.*
- *My own agenda. My heart.*
- *Knowing my mom will always be with me. She lives on in heaven and in me.*
- *God, you know everything - and you know me, and everything I need to surrender is everything in me.*
- *Depression.*
- *My wants over His. My time reading my bible. Lord I want you. Please come.*
- *Willing to surrender: career dreams/ \$, OCD, friend troubles, jealousy, compassion, judgment, guilt, everything.*
- *Masturbation; hungry to be loved by another.*
- *I want to surrender my worry of the future.*
- *The lies I made from my parents - being honest.*
- *Relationship with Mom.*
- *Wanting someone to love me.*
- *Fighting with my sister.*
- *Not knowing the future; letting God provide in every aspect of my life.*
- *Not a lot of stuff, not asking for everything.*
- *Making everything about me.*
- *Being perfect, needing to fit in.*
- *God I surrender my stress from my brother. He is going through so much and I need to know, and need help knowing, I can't take on his problems.*
- *I surrender...my stubbornness to open my heart.*
- *My pain.*

- *Time, focus.*
- *I'm struggling with actually giving myself to God! I need God in my chaos.*
- *Not putting God first.*
- *Time, personal judgment, feat of others' judgment.*
- *I need help letting go of my childhood and my Dad. All I get from it is my pain. I just want peace in me. I know my Dad will never change and I need to cut him and the trouble he brings out of my life.*
- *Possessions.*
- *John and Kelly, Live life for Jesus, Whether or not to have sex with my boyfriend, nicer to parents, hope Grandma's cancer goes away.*
- *My time.*
- *Possessions.*
- *Doubt.*
- *Doing good things for the wrong reasons, not to honor You.*
- *Lord, help me to continue walking on your path, to finally open my heart back up to the ones who need my love.*
- *I'm willing to surrender my pain/depression and fear of the new adventure My mom and I are starting.*
- *Relationships.*
- *My lust and the things I look at for them, not accepting Your Love or Grace.*
- *I surrender college and to whom I will marry.*
- *God I give You my pride in the if's You have given me, my sense of entitlement, my what if's. God I give you my relationship with Daniel. Capture my heart.*
- *Talk, money, pride, fear.*
- *God, help me. Help me become someone I can please. Help me focus on what I need to focus on. Dear God save me.*
- *Gossip. Ugh. Lord this is so hard.*
- *The need to be the best at everything.*
- *Not procrastinating.*

- *The loneliness no one sees, and the pain no one knows. I lay it at the Cross for you to take.*
- *Material possessions. Take 'em.*
- *Giving up my own control.*
- *To surrender some of my possessions.*
- *Strength.*
- *I don't need to live up to the expectations others put on me.*
- *My insecurities of who I am.*
- *My part in being social to other people.*
- *Jesus, I need help. Lord I'm sorry I continue to live with this secret shame. Help me.*
- *My alter ego.*
- *(Boys name) God help me have more grace to show him. I always take him for granted, but he is a blessing.*
- *I need help with getting a good paying career.*
- *The pain of not living up to expectations.*
- *I surrender myself to You, Lord.*
- *Surrender my worry.*
- *Guys, personal looks, family issues, feelings toward my dad.*
- *Lust, selfishness, greed, materialism, alcohol.*
- *Personal looks, shame and feeling unworthy, unhappy and worthless.*
- *Pride.*
- *Selfishness.*
- *Four P's; wanting to love myself and my body, look for his love everyday, feeling him everyday.*
- *Weed.*
- *Personal looks, obsession.*
- *Personal looks.*
- *My stress, my striving for academic perfection.*
- *My life, the need to be wanted.*
- *Regrets, worries, depression, loneliness.*
- *Self-consciousness.*

- *Believing satan's lies has led to cutting.*
- *Future.*
- *My lack of involvement with youth group.*
- *My impure thoughts.*
- *Myself, in all the pride, loathing, and disappointment.*
- *What others think of me.*
- *Depression, Suicidal emotions.*
- *Performance: school and crew.*
- *Controlling my own life instead of letting him.*
- *Possessions.*
- *I don't know, I need help.*
- *Clean up my mess Lord. Heal my heart.*
- *My EDNOS: fears of relapsing.*
- *Performance for other people, priorities, patience.*
- *Committing to true and real friendships.*
- *Acting different around different people not always living for God.*
- *My comfort zone.*
- *Fear/Worry.*
- *Worrying about a job, not trusting God's financial provisions. Boy and future with him.*
- *Summer, Sean, next year.*
- *Selfishness, pride, control, let go.*
- *Disrespect. My family and girlfriend.*
- *God I want to surrender my full commitment to You.*
- *Self-image, worry.*
- *Performance - academically and in sports.*
- *Always being brave, performance, independence.*

We sure received a potpourri of responses. Some responses are deep and incredibly insightful, and some miss the point entirely. Isn't this exactly how it is with student ministry and the variety of students with whom we work? As we consider how to care for them and their hearts, it is important we have a true picture of what is going on with them. We cannot project on

them a depth that isn't there, and we can't minimize a wound because it seems small to us. We have to love them where they are. Most of them are in a place where they can identify some place of brokenness and need. It is in this place where a huge ministry opportunity exists.

It is amazing the depth of emotion and brokenness students feel about such a wide range of issues. Some of these issues are profound and rightly deserve our urgent attention. Others are tiny and seemingly insignificant.

But no matter how big or small the wound seems to us, it is profound to them. These areas of surrender and brokenness should not be overlooked.

They are, in fact, the thin places where we can share the good news of God's love, grace, and healing for our students.

Students today have little use for a Savior who helps them manage their sin.

Sin makes no sense to them. But they have a huge need for a Savior who will meet them in their brokenness and pain, will gladly accept the surrender of their garbage and exchange it for life.

May we lavish the healing balm of Christ upon our students; no matter how big or small their wounds may be. >>

Students are becoming socially stunted.

There have been a number of articles and news stories about how young people are leaving Facebook in droves. I get that part of it has to do with the fact that parents are there and they want autonomy. While I will not disagree with this theory, I think there is something else going on. What if students' departure from Facebook is not just about autonomy, but developmental stagnation?

Facebook made its name by connecting college students through a social network. College students were able to connect with friends, classmates, and people with like-minded passions; who are more mature and socially developed than students in high school and middle school - especially back when college students still actually talked face to face with one another.

To survive and thrive on the Facebook platform takes some social chops.

You have to know what to post, how to present yourself, what to reveal about yourself, and an opportunity for feedback. You can "like" something, comment, and all these interactions are visible to your entire network.

Managing this actually takes skill, humor, wisdom, and discernment. Oh, and most importantly, this takes actually knowing how to maintain friendships; hence, the term “friends”.

I think students are departing Facebook in droves because students don’t know how to have “friends.”

Students know how to follow and how to have followers, but this is dramatically different than having friends. Because our students increasingly don’t know how to have friends, they are settling into a shadow experience of friendships. Posting pictures on Instagram, or “tweets” through Twitter are about as base level social interaction as you can get. Here is a thought or a picture. The end. At best, it will get “liked”, “favorited”, or even “re-tweeted”. In a rare exception you might receive a comment. But have you noticed? Comments are not really part of the Instagram culture. It is simply about collecting “likes.”

And one step lower on the social developmental scale is Snap Chat. It is the simplicity of Instagram, but with absolutely no opportunity for feedback - just a picture to be enjoyed or shocked for a few seconds. These are the preferred modes of student interaction.

I am not saying students don’t know how to be friends. . . Okay, actually I am.

Students don’t know how to be friends. At best, a student will have a tiny cluster of one - or maybe two other people - who are their true friends, their true social network. They talk, share stories and activities, and live life together. Add another two or three people and watch it spiral out of control. Students don’t know how to manage social networks in real life. Consequently, they cannot manage them online. It is for this reason that students are fleeing Facebook!

> **Where do we go from here?**

- 1) We need to understand that students are connected to their phones, but are not connected to people. They are simply broadcasting information and being voyeuristic in the lives of others. Just because you can use social media and maintain social networks, doesn’t mean the 15 year olds in your group can.

2) Part of our mandate as youth workers is not to just connect students to Jesus, but help them connect to one other. It is lame that manners, eye contact, kindness, squelching gossip, teaching the art of question-asking, and the masters level course of follow up questions is part of our job. But if we assume this is happening, or pretend our students don't need this education as well, our efforts to connect them to Jesus will ultimately fail; because they will not know how to connect to God's people and to the church.

3) Find ways to shut down their phones. Phones are now the ultimate distraction and escape. When students have their phones they are not engaged. The truth is, when I have my phone, I am not engaged. So find opportunities to limit them. Have camp where there isn't service. Make sure you travel internationally so they won't get service. Buy a jammer so cell phones won't work in the youth room. Okay, most of these ideas aren't really practical. But we must start to find ways to limit this sort of screen time so students can actually learn to connect with other humans and connect with God.

4) Small group leaders are the key! In most ministries, it is the small group time where adults and students can actually interact. Let's give our small group leaders the tools and guts to collect phones, teach manners, and help students actually connect to each other. Most students are satisfied with their shallow friendships they experience on the fringes of their life. They don't even have a taste for what deep relationships can bring. And maybe when they experience true friendship - true communion - they will not settle for simple interactions currently brought by their social media experience.

May we, too, not settle for a broadcasted version of relationships, but one of true interaction - true communion. May we have relationships where we share one another's joys as well as burdens; and model to this fragmented world that love can only be experienced in true relationships. How cool is it that the church is actually the only place on this planet which offers true community and friendship with people across all socio-economic and ethnic lines - and even more so, offers friendship with God through Jesus Christ? >>

Helping your Seniors develop a faith that is ready for college

> **Our Seniors Aren't Ready!**

It doesn't matter where you find yourself on the theological spectrum, there is huge concern regarding the complete abandonment of the Christian faith by our youth group students when they leave for college. There are movies like Divided; which see youth ministry as the main culprit for this loss of faith. There are books like Sticky Faith; which want to reshape and redirect youth ministries to work more closely within the churches who fund them and alongside the parents of their community.

For as long as I can remember, there have always been an enormous exodus of students from the church the second they leave the comfort and confines of home and experience a world where there are no more boundaries, no more rules, and no more accountability to their former way of life. I find the statistics overwhelming and the actual students who choose to walk away, heartbreaking. While I cannot solve all the cultural or ecclesiological contributing problems, I can be more proactive and intentional in the way I do student ministry so my students have a fighting chance when they head off into the big bad world.

> **Historically, Confirmation Was the Tool**

I was brought up in a Christian tradition that included something called confirmation. This was a class that was offered for seventh graders who were interested in joining the church. At least, this is how I understood it at the time. As an adult I have come to see that confirmation is the specific time the church makes space for kids who have grown up in the church and/or have been baptized as infants to “confirm” the faith as their own.

Until this point, it is assumed the faith they have has been passed down from their family. And now, as seventh graders, they take an intentional step forward proclaiming that the faith in which they were brought up is no longer just their parents' but is now their own.

Whether or not your church has an active confirmation program, it is an idea that is worth consideration and possibly even re-visioning. The presupposition with confirmation is that faith in Jesus Christ is a personal decision. It cannot be passed on through blood. At some point, children,

adolescents, or adults, must take personal responsibility for their faith and affirm it as their own. Confirmation is the process that affirms the faith of the family, the teachings of the church, and encourages seventh graders to take hold of the faith as their own.

The problem I have with this process is that seventh grade doesn't seem like the right age for students to own their faith separate from their parents. In fact, it has been my experience that most kids who participate do so at the strong request of their parents. With the lengthening of adolescence, it is safe to say that seventh graders 30 years ago are dramatically different than kids the same age today. They remain firm in early adolescence with the culmination of individuation needing another 15 years or so to mature.

Seventh graders are at the very beginning of identity formation. Because of this fact, they are totally unable to develop a faith separate from that of their parents. I am not saying they are unable to have faith at this age. I am simply saying their faith is intimately tied to that of their parents.

Instead of throwing out confirmation because it doesn't seem to work for seventh graders, what if we simply took the concept and applied it to the demographic who is most able to wrestle through the issues that come up in confirmation.

> A Confirmation Designed Specifically For Seniors

Seniors in high school are firmly in mid-adolescence and are fully wrestling with who they are. Identity formation is in high gear as students are continually reshaping who they are, where they fit in, and what sort of contribution they are going to make. As seniors they are getting ready to launch into college where they will have unlimited options to work this out.

A confirmation designed specifically for seniors gets to walk with a group of students who statistically are getting ready to bail on their faith. It gets to identify the potential pitfalls they will face and give them the tools they will need to navigate this new world.

By starting with the end in mind, we are able to craft a program/class/small group (whatever term you find easiest to swallow) that will be able to maintain seniors interest in youth group and the church; allows space for difficult questions; equips them for their future; celebrates them in the church; and launches them into the world.

> **How We Do It**

This is the plan we have come up with to pull off confirmation with our seniors:

1) Go On a Road Trip: Trying to communicate this idea is pretty difficult in a Sunday school or youth group setting. So, we communicate this idea on a state-wide fun-filled and adventurous road trip. While we are on this trip, we use our program time to clarify the expectations of our seniors. We say out loud that youth group is not for them. So when they feel bored, they are feeling the right things. Youth group is for the younger students and their job is to set the tone for the group and be our leaders. Since youth group is not for them, we have come up with a special monthly dinner for just seniors to wrestle with their faith and how to make it their own.

2) Senior Dinners: Once a month we meet at a different senior's house for dinner and discussion. The idea is that youth group fun and games is not relevant in the life of a senior who is leaning into a life outside of the home. Instead of pretending this isn't happening, we say it out loud. We craft dinner discussions allowing students space to wrestle with their faith and hopefully make it their own.

The assumption is, up to this point, their faith is mostly a shadow of their parent's faith or the youth ministries faith. But for them to have a faith that will last into adulthood, they must make their faith their own. On our road trip, we brainstorm ideas and topics for these dinners and roll them out in a way they can build upon themselves. Some topics are repeats from their time in youth group. But all of them are spun with an application towards their life a year from now. Some of the topics we wrestle with are:

- How to Read/Study the Bible
- How to develop convictions
- Peer Pressure
- Navigating a world with no rules
- How to make new friends (It is amazing that they don't know how to do this)
- Finding a Church / Fellowship
- Wrestling with Evolution, Sexuality, Politics, other Religions
- Love and Relationships
- Worry, Doubt, Anxiety

Most of these topics are their topics. The only ones I make happen every year are a challenge to read through the New Testament and how to develop convictions. Most students have been told their entire lives what is right and what is wrong, but have not been given the tools to discern from the Holy Spirit what is right and wrong. These set the foundation for the rest of our topics.

3) Celebration Sunday: Every June, our seniors take over the worship service at our church and lead our congregation in worship. It is a sweet time where our youth band leads in singing worship, and our seniors share their testimonies. Since the goal of senior confirmation is helping them make their faith their own, I have every student write a testimony about where they are at in their walk with God.

Some of them are really amazing testimonies of God's goodness and grace; and some of them are a watermark of seeking understanding and meaning. We allow students from the entire spiritual spectrum share. As I meet with them, I do allow them to share whatever is honest about where they are and what they are going through. The only part upon which I have them reflect, and add, is to write a paragraph about how our church has been part of that process and to say thank you.

It is tiresome to have a never-ending stream of students be angsty towards the church. The truth is, our church and many churches out there invest thousands and thousands of dollars into the faith development of their students. Even if students choose to walk away from their faith, I want them to reflect on how the church has loved them and affirm that it will be there for them. For the students who do choose to walk away from their faith, I want to make the return onramp as easy as possible.

When the service is just about over, I take the reins back from the students and hand them over to our lead pastor. We wrap up our service with an intentional blessing and commencement as we, the entire church, recognize that these young adults on stage are not children anymore – but, instead, are adults and invaluable parts of our church body.

We invite our entire senior class up front. Their parents, friends, family, and the rest of our youth group, is invited to come up and lay a hand upon them as they are consecrated and launched. It is a powerful service and a fitting end to a confirmation track.

What is Your Plan? If we want our students to have a fighting chance to maintain their faith into college and adulthood, we must be intentional with the ways in which we prepare them. There are a ton of great resources and ideas out there. Which ones do you use?

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Why do kids really leave the church? SEX!

After I read David Kinnaman's newest book, [You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith](#), I have wrestled with some of the implications from his findings. His chapter on sex got my wheels spinning the most.

In that chapter, Kinnaman highlights how the church's views of purity and abstinence are directly in conflict with the lengthening of time people, including Christians, are taking to settle down and marry. Individualism is becoming the core value; and when marriage, sex, and sexuality are seen through that lens, there is bound to be conflict and tension with the traditional church. These aren't really revolutionary thoughts. That is, until you place the changing sexual ethic and overlay it with the renewed passion in which professional church people are trying to understand why so many church kids are leaving, never to return.

> **My hypothesis: SEX IS THE NUMBER ONE REASON PEOPLE ARE LEAVING THE CHURCH!**

In every survey, conversation, seminar and book, we are given a host of reasons as to why kids are leaving. The fault almost always lays at the feet of the church and the poor expression of faith they portray; or the faulty model of a one-eared mickey-mouse student ministry; or the fact that there are not enough adults in the lives of students.

But as I thought about Kinnaman's book and my years of anecdotal evidence, it seems those reasons are simply smoke screens to the deeper issue: Kids and young adults want to have sex. They want to have a lot of it; and they don't want to wait until they are 30 and get married to start. But this reason seems so carnal, self-indulgent and simple. So these students develop amazing smoke screens to throw us off the scent.

What about the dinosaurs? Can't explain it? Then this faith is a joke so let's have sex! My youth pastor is uncomfortable with me because I have slept with three girls in the youth group. This church is so judgmental!

My parents don't want me to live with my girlfriend. I know they did before they got married! What hypocrites!

> These are not straw men:

Think about all the students who have gone through your youth group.

Think of all the students who have made strong professions of faith and then bailed. When you unpack their protests and smoke screens, isn't the root cause some sexual encounter or lifestyle that makes them and us uncomfortable to the point where they back away?

When I ask my colleagues - and as we pry back the layers - sex is always the root. Drinking: For whatever reason, the students who drink still manage to participate in Christian community (until they have sex).

Doubt: The apologetics to address doubts of most 12-20 year olds have been written about for decades. Sex: But once sex happens, the lines of communication get strained and ultimately cut off.

There was a time only a generation ago, where only sex was the cause for students to drop out of community. But because many of them would get married in their early 20's, it wasn't a hard leap to jump back in to Christian community now that their sex was legitimized. This was the case with many of my first generation youth group kids and my own peers.

Have you noticed how tentative people who are living together feel at church. They come but don't get too close because they know they will be judged for living together. Many times, this is too uncomfortable so they quit coming all together. For those couples who love Jesus and long for Christian community, this jump is easy to do once they have tied the knot.

> "I couldn't abstain until I was married, but these young people should."

What is even wilder is how everyone seems to forget this history with their own kids or others at church. The vast majority of couples at church have slept with others and one another before they were married; and many also lived together. Once they are married, they all seem to have forgotten their past infractions and plan to put this burden of purity and abstinence on their children. This burden was one they couldn't carry, and one they seem to have little or no grace for people who are in the middle of this struggle.

This struggle is really for those Christians who marry in their early 20's.

But now that people are getting married much later, often into their 30's, their distance from the church and Christian community has now been put on the back burner for over half their life and returning to it is like returning

to a foreign land. With so much water under the bridge, many never make it into the church or Christian community again.

We want to blame ourselves, but the sexual ethics of students and young adults is the core reason for the departure. Is this statement too bold? Does your experience differ from mine? If you didn't settle for the smoke screen, would you too find sex to be the root cause?

> If my hypothesis is correct, here are some questions I have moving forward:

- Can we not let smoke screens work?
- Can we allow students and young adults to carry the consequences of their choices and not blame ourselves?
- Do we need to encourage students to get married earlier?
- Why do people who failed in this area put such a high burden on our students regarding sex and sexuality?
- Is it unrealistic to expect purity and abstinence from our students?
- Does the church's teaching on sex and sexuality actually cause more harm than good in the discipleship of our students?
- What do we lose if we treat sex and sexuality like gluttony and materialism? Give it a head nod but don't hammer at it too much as to make people uncomfortable.
- Is it the right call to lose so many young people as long as we teach TRUTH?
- Can/should we make space in our ministries for students and young adults who are sexually active (and not make them hide)?

What questions does this hypothesis raise for you? What answers do you have? May God be gracious with us all as we wrestle through this increasingly challenging issue.

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The value of “Cry Night”

> I Used to be Really Frustrated by “Cry Night”:

A few years ago I was invited to speak at a winter camp. Unbeknownst to me, there was a fixed spiritual rhythm to their retreat. Over this three-night winter camp hovered the expectation of increased spiritual depth, culminating with some sort of significant moment or opportunity for response. I found out about this rhythm solely by accident.

I wanted to have an opportunity for response every time we were together. I wanted each session to carry its own weight and expectation for response. I crafted each session with very unique tactile ways to respond to what the Holy Spirit was doing. And I don't mean to boast, but these were some of the most creative and brilliant sessions I had ever put together.

On Sunday morning the counselors had had enough. They could no longer hold in their frustration and confusion. In our morning counselor meeting I was finally confronted with this hidden expectation. “Our kids are really confused because you keep asking them to respond at the end of every session. Normally, ‘Cry Night’ happens on Sunday night, and our kids are really concerned about what is going to happen tonight.”

At first this statement really caught me off guard. “Cry Night” was no longer a programmatic inside joke of camp counselors, but part of the story for the actual students. Because these students expected to become Christians and respond to the Holy Spirit at a specific time and place, they were unable to fully embrace other things God might have had for them.

> Maybe “Cry Night” Isn't That Bad:

As the speaker, I was pretty frustrated with the camp as well as the leaders for not helping their students process this change in spiritual rhythm. But now that I have some years away from this experience, and my pride and ego have recovered from not being as warmly received as I thought I should have been, I see a silver lining from this experience.

These students - for better or for worse - counted on Sunday night of winter camp being the time of God showing up and rocking their world. This night

had become legendary; and the expectation was, this winter camp would be the same. God was going to show up - and show up big on Sunday night.

What a gift it is to be a part of a ministry that has set watermarks where students expect that God will show up. While many of us wouldn't admit aloud that we intentionally plan for "Cry Nights", the truth is we work really hard to establish rhythms in our ministry where our students begin to count on God showing up.

In my youth ministry calendar, our winter camp is where we expect God to show up and rock our kids' world. We also expect God to show up in a big way on our mission trips to Mexico and Guatemala. We have a summer conference involving our entire denomination, and we expect the same experience there.

Each of these events has become legendary within our own ministry. Every time we have a Youth Sunday at church or a student baptism, it is certain one of the aforementioned events will get mentioned as the place where the student gave their lives to Jesus or made a significant commitment regarding their faith. And as we've retold the stories, the expectations have continued to grow. Now, it's in the DNA of our group to expect nothing less, so we actually pray harder and with more expectancy. Sure enough, we see God appear and work in even bigger ways.

> **Being Expectant is the Key:**

Ask, and it will be given. Seek and you will find, Knock and the door will be opened.

Expectation seems to be the beginning of this exciting adventure of faith with God. Without it, we are nothing more than people passing on a religious family tradition.

When I am expectant in my walk with God, my eyes begin to scan the landscape for hints and traces of the Holy Spirit. As I lean in and strain my eyes even more, I am blown away at how present God is and has been. My faith expands, and I actually become more open to what God might have for me in my own life. By being expectant I ask, seek, and knock; counting on a response from God. And sure enough, there always is.

The growing edge for me, and for our ministry as we get ready to launch our fall schedule, is to approach every youth group, event and conversation

like it was Sunday night at winter camp - or Thursday night on our mission trip. I am counting on God being there and grabbing hold of our students in a new and fresh way. I don't necessarily think every encounter will result in crying, but I am counting on every one of them being a place where God shows up and students have an opportunity to respond.

May we be reminded this year that we serve a living God who longs to meet, redeem, transform, empower each one of our students. And may we craft our ministry in such a way we expect our students to experience this reality every time we are together; not just on "Cry Night"!

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Why social justice should not be the focus of your student ministry

According to the California Teacher's Association website, Generation Z is the one who, "while they may be named for the last letter of the alphabet, will soon be at the forefront of solving the worst environmental, social and economic problems in history." This generation, born in the mid 90's, or current middle and high school students, are supposed to be the ones who will fix all of our problems. This is the generation who will recognize the damage we have done to the planet and to each other, and rise up and fix it. This is a perspective by many secular leaders, and is a calling that Christian and non-Christian kids are trying to live into. With social action being all the rage right now, the church has been able to find common purpose with our culture to expand God's Kingdom.

But is social action and world change really the goal of the youth worker? Is mobilizing an army of young people to enact lasting social change what we are called to do?

> Justice is part of the calling of all Christians.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we get the picture that a true and whole faith cannot escape the call for God's people to live into their faith and be about God's heart for our broken world. In the book of Micah, when God's people had all their great religious practices, the prophet makes it very clear that the application of their faith was in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. We cannot love God on one hand and stand by while the poor are being oppressed. James says a similar thing in his book as he declares that faith without works is dead. Our faith shows itself in the way we live it out. True religion is caring for widows and orphans.

It is encouraging to see our culture have a heightened awareness and call for justice. To move past compassion ministries, and work toward fixing the systems that keep people in systemic poverty, is a mighty task. This is also one of the tasks of the Church. Christians in power must use it to stand up for those without a strong voice. Desire for justice is also the desire of our culture. Civil rights, worker's rights, going green, fair trade; these are good

cultural desires, and with which are easily partnered because it is also the heart of God.

> **Justice is about POWER. Our students don't really have any.**

The problem with calling students to social action and justice ministry is, these terms are too vague. They tend to be just a feel good sport dealing with ideas and concepts having no real touch points for them. In our area, students love wearing Tom's shoes, drinking fair trade coffee and Ethos water, boycotting Wal-Mart, and shopping at American Apparel. These are the markers of students who "care" and who are "making a difference". In many cases, these are token gestures carrying zero weight into other and all areas of their lives. This is because justice and lasting social change is a job for people with power. Students have no real power to stop hunger, make fair trade happen, stand up for homeless rights, or racial discrimination. It is people with real power who can transform unjust systems; not students with too much disposable income.

Thankfully, God has already been calling people and organizations to work for justice and social change. God has called people of power and influence. God has collected money and resources. And God has been and will continue to enact lasting influence in the specific places where those people are called. And because justice is the heart of God and should also be our hearts, we have the opportunity to partner with organizations already doing great work and will continue to do so. International Justice Mission, World Vision, and our Community Food Bank are three places where our students get to work alongside people who are enacting social change with whom we have chosen to partner. Because these organizations are established, and here for the long haul, any involvement we have with them strengthens their ministry and does, in fact, help enact social change.

When we took students to Mexico for our annual mission trip, we worked really hard to retrain our students' thinking. We are not the great white church who is going to help the poor Mexican church by changing the lives and community with our week of good works and testimonies. Rather, we were invited to partner with what God is already doing. God was already at work in the community where we served. God was already using people to transform that community. We simply reaped the pleasure of working alongside our sisters and brothers in Christ, encouraging one another as they worked toward lasting social change.

> Justice for our students must happen on their campus.

Social action and Justice for which students can fight is the injustice happening on their campuses every day. They can use their social power to stand up for the little guy, to confront bullies, and to speak up and for those who are marginalized on their campus. This kind of social justice and social action actually costs students something real; their social status. If our focus was to have students work toward social change and justice, their campus needs to be the laboratory for their faith to take action. Their campus is where they are to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God. Their campus is where their faith must be lived out in action.

So is social action and justice our calling? I would argue the answer is no. It is the fruit of our calling, but should not be the focus. We are called by God to make disciples. We have been called by God to walk with students through this short season of their lives and to partner with God to help solidify and own their faith, and to begin to discern their unique calling. And like good missionaries we will use any and all places, stories, and values where our cultural values and desires match the values and desires of God. Some people call this a thin place; a place where the veil between the sacred and secular is especially slim. Right now, social action and justice get to be that place where we can partner with culture and use it as a common story with our cultural context as a compelling way to tell the Gospel Story.

Christians have done this from the beginning. In the book of Acts we see Stephen use Old Testament history to communicate the Gospel to his Jewish audience. Paul uses a local poet and an unknown altar on Mars Hill to communicate a knowable God. In recent history, Josh McDowell used the power of logic and reason, when logic and reason were king to communicate that we don't have a blind faith but a reasonable faith. Even Audio Adrenaline made an impact by using the growing place for music and rock 'n roll to highlight the fact that Jesus came to give us an abundant life; and portray Christianity as not the boring, saying-no-to-everything-fun sort of religion. Now in our current context, social action and justice is the thin place. It is the place where cultural values touch our spiritual values. We can use that as a place to communicate the Gospel of a God who sees and loves the poor and oppressed, and calls his people to do the same.

Just like in the past, the thin place is not the goal. Old Testament history, local poets and artists, logic and reason, Christian music, and even social action are not the goal. The goal is for students to give their hearts to Jesus Christ and experience personal transformation and to live into their unique calling. For students to do this, they need to be a part of a ministry and a church that provides a well balanced diet of teaching, experiences, community and action.

Service projects and mission trips are a vital part of the youth ministry diet. They are an important part, but only a part. These trips and opportunities provide experiences for students to explore their calling as God's people and solidify their faith as their own. The body of Christ is made up of many different parts. Students need to see a vital Christian life lived out in many arenas. Vital faith is lived out in normal jobs like ones held by many of our volunteer staff; it is lived out as missions, overseas and local; it is lived out in activism; it is lived out in compassion ministries; and it is lived out in Vacation Bible School. A vital faith that is lived out in action happens in whatever context God places us. Exposing students to the many different ways vital faith is lived out is a tool toward achieving the goal. We are to help students develop their own true and vital faith; living it out in the unique way God has made and called them.

It is great that students want to be a part of something bigger than themselves; to be about saving the planet or stopping injustice. We need to celebrate these values because they are the cultural values aligned with our Christian values. But unless hearts are yielded to Christ and transformed by Him, the result is still dead faith. Social action and world change are real places we can use to present a powerful and relevant Gospel - a holistic Gospel that causes lasting personal transformation; both local and global.

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Your students are not ready to live missionally.

I think baseball is an amazing sport. On the surface, it is a simple game; hitting and fielding. But the more you dive into the game, the more you see the deep strategy, pitch selection, and never-ending statistics. Since my dream of becoming a professional baseball player didn't pan out, I am now putting that pressure on my son. So, this last spring we signed him up for his first season of T-ball. It is quite an entertaining sight to watch a group of five year olds learning the game. The first season of T-ball is just that: Learning the very basics. By the end of the season, these kids mostly know their positions, the direction in which to run around the bases, how to hit a ball off a T, and that is about it. But the foundation has been laid; a trajectory set for these kids to become legitimate baseball players; and for my son to fulfill my dream of playing in the bigs!

But even more than my son playing professional baseball, my dream for him is to be a Godly man who loves Jesus; as he loves Jesus, to live a life reflecting that love in his personal life; as his personal life reflects his love for Jesus, to live "within the culture as a missionary who is as faithful to the Father and his gospel as Jesus was in his own time and place".

My dream is that my son would mature in his faith and live a life that is missional.

Missional living is truly advanced Christianity. It is advanced because it assumes the foundations of the faith are firmly established. It assumes we have our identity firmly set in Christ. It assumes a biblical worldview; which means we have a base understanding of scripture. It assumes our lives reflect the hope and transformation that happens when we grow in Christ. With this foundation of faith firmly set, we can differentiate ourselves from our culture. We can think in an abstract manner and wrestle with issues of contextualization in order to be faithful to the Gospel message in our time and place - just like Jesus was in His time and place. With this abstract thinking, we are ready to take our personal faith and our cultural understanding, and live as missionaries to our context where we can communicate the good news of Jesus with both our words and deeds.

This advanced form of Christianity is a needed direction for the Church to go. I have been so encouraged by the books and blogs I have read, the conversations I have had with my colleagues, and even by the conversations

among our church's leadership. Living a missional life - stepping outside ourselves and the walls of the church - is exactly what we need to do in order to reach our communities for Christ. While I agree this is the trajectory of the church - and the needed direction for our churches - the issue is to determine how much of being missional can our students digest.

Everyone from Chap Clark to Time Magazine has been saying with a unified voice that adolescents are taking decades longer than preceding generations. What is taking so long is the ability to answer three significant questions regarding their identity. In the book Starting Right, the author states these key questions are: Who am I? Do I matter? How do I relate to others?

At the very same time it is taking longer and longer for students to mature, many youth workers are wrestling with how to give this advanced form of Christianity to people who can't even answer the first question - Who am I? - with any certainty, let alone begin to answer the final question about how they relate to others. While the church needs to have these conversations, it is vital that those of us who work with students don't put our own spiritual journey onto our students. What we are learning and the ways we are working out our faith has to be different than that of the 15-year-old boy in our student ministry.

In the student ministry world "milk" has gotten a bad rap. It is true that in Hebrews the author lays into the congregation because they're still drinking spiritual milk. But for real babies, that is what they need to drink. The rub comes when they should be eating solid food, yet still drink milk. I think high school, and certainly middle school, students are not at all ready for steak. This isn't a put-down. If we are honest and take a look at our average student in our ministry, we would also agree our students are not ready for this advanced form of Christianity. They have no idea who they are, whether they matter, or even how to relate to others because of their identity.

Our students are fragmented in their thinking and in their living. At church and with their church friends they live one way. With their friends at school, they live another. And for some of our students who are blessed to have overlap with these worlds, it appears they are ready for more. When in reality, they simply have a great community while continuing to work out their identity. Working out their identity is the key. And their identity has to

be differentiated from their parents', their peers', and even their youth group's identity. This means that who they are and the faith they have and are going to live out is all formed and worked out during this middle season of adolescents.

This brings us back to the original point that students, mid-adolescents, are not ready to live missionally. They need to work out the fundamentals of their identity and faith by differentiating it from others. It is only after this is done that they are ready to engage their culture in any sort of meaningfully missional way.

My son's T-ball season is more similar to student ministry than I thought. You see, T-ball is for teaching the fundamentals. It is painting the picture of what real baseball will be like. His coaches don't simply teach the team the age appropriate version of baseball mechanics. They provide instruction in the age appropriate version of baseball. This is the delicate balance we need to give our students. We don't push them toward having a faith for which they aren't ready. Yet, we don't baby them with a faith for their current spiritual level. We give them an age appropriate faith that points to how a mature faith should look.

Here are a couple of thoughts as we move forward; allowing space for our students to be where they are developmentally while painting a picture of healthy mature faith:

We model steak-eating Christianity in our own lives. This means, as adult leaders, we live lives of purpose; where we have a personal and social righteousness; we love mercy, do justly, and walk humbly with our God. These lives are lived out missionally and firmly planted in our cultural context.

We communicate a Christianity that is missional in our words and deeds. This means, even though, developmentally, our students aren't ready to do this, we help them develop the habits of missional living. Just like my son practicing running bases and throwing the ball to first base doesn't fully matter in T-ball, but is vital in baseball. In the same way, we work through these fundamentals with our students. We take them on mission trips; we commit and perform acts of service and compassion; and we partner with organizations that work for justice.

We do this in an age appropriate manner. And for this age, our focus should be on identity formation, not identity application. We have to help students

figure out who they are and how they matter before we put them to work. If they are just going through the motions without a clear identity, they will struggle with how their faith is any different than the Lions Club or Rotary or Habitat for Humanity. We live missionally because we have been redeemed and transformed by the power of Jesus Christ - and this is the hope, laying the foundation for any sort of missional living.

Let us not put our developmental issues on our students. We need to be missional. We need to push our churches to be missional. But our students need to understand who they are and who they are in Christ before we push them to be missional. May Jesus - who is so faithful and uses all our feeble attempts - continue to woo, redeem and transform our students so He may use them as missionaries in their context.

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The secret ingredient for keeping students connected to Christ

The million-dollar question seems to be: “How do we keep students committed to Jesus into adulthood?” This is one of the main questions I have been wrestling with during my tenure as a youth pastor. And depending on the season, I end up somewhere swinging between it all being on Jesus or all being on me. It is true that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith, and as shepherds we are called by God to build up our students in their faith. At the end of the day, it is both. I plant, you water; I plant, you water. God causes there to be growth and life. This is a mysterious partnership.

In this mysterious partnership there are always better techniques and practices to improve our planting and watering. And if we take a step back, we will see that the solution to fertile and usable soil has been there all along. We try all these ways to make the Gospel more appealing, to make the good news seem better. In the process, we distance ourselves from the church. The church is old, bureaucratic, institutionalized, boring, irrelevant.

This thinking and behavior move might win us points in the short term. **For the moment, it may make us seem hip, flexible, and relevant. For the long haul, though, this attitude decimates the chances of our students becoming adult followers of Christ.**

If our time and energy are spent winning students to us or to our student ministry at the expense of the church we really are cutting off the nose to spite the face. The church, warts and all, is where adult followers of Christ gather for worship, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry. Student ministry is temporary. College ministry is temporary. Big church has to be the place where we help students land if we want them to continue to know and love Jesus into adulthood.

One of the greatest quotes I have ever heard was from a random volunteer on a Mexico mission trip. He said, **“Student ministry is a short-term mission in a long term life.”** If you think about it, this is a revolutionary concept. Just like short-term missions, we are only around for a short

period of time. To be effective and a true blessing, we partner with those people who have been there and will continue to be there in the long term.

We don't show up as the end all to ministry because we know we are there for only a short amount of time. Instead, we work our butts off in that short amount of time and are a blessing to the community with whom we partner. Then, we graciously hand them off to their long-term community.

Student ministry as short-term missions: Student ministry must be seen as short-term mission, and the landing place for long-term mission is the church. For students to not get caught in the middle, we must do a better job of loving the church; highlighting how the church has been caring for the students, helping students fit into adult worship, encouraging students to serve, and finding meaningful ways to transition students into the adult life of the church. This allows there to be meaningful, long-term faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. The following are some principles we have implemented at our church to help our students stay connected to the church.

First, it is not okay for student ministry leaders - myself included - to be among the biggest critics of the church. Our jobs and budgets are there because the church loves students. They shell out tons of money to provide a person and place for students to figure out who Jesus is in an environment that works for their development. And if we take their money and recourses and then discredit the very people who provide for us and our students, everyone loses. We must communicate with our students that the old, out of touch, adult church, loves them so much. Their love is why we have a youth worker, a youth room and a budget. Their love and resources are how our mission trips get paid for and actually happen - because the church places high value on students. (But sometimes the adult leaders don't know the best way to show it).

Second, everything we do points to getting our students connected to “big church.” Big church is the formal term for the adult worship gathering. With all the great things that happen at youth group and Sunday student worship, we do a huge disservice if we don't help our students engage in adult worship. There is a discipline to singing worship for 30 minutes; or for standing and sitting liturgy; for long sermons that don't speak directly to students' lives. This is where the adult church gathers and is ministered to and worships together; and it is a learned habit. If this habit is instilled in junior high, it will be much easier for them to continue to worship with adults when they are one - as opposed to only worshipping with their peers in services designed only for them.

Another way we help our students connect is by making service to the church part of our ministry diet. Our students regularly serve in children's ministry. Their service is not just because we need warm bodies there. It is because we are continually reminding them of how we spiritually develop spiritually. That is, we are always pouring our lives into someone younger and always finding people older than us to pour their lives into us. Children's ministry is a great place to remind our students that the church loves them and cares for them. It did when they were little; it does now; and will continue as each one of us gets older.

The last thing we do to connect our students to our adult worshipping community is to have a transition service for the senior class in our student ministry. We spend an entire service in the spring for our seniors to share their testimonies. In these testimonies, we work with them to reflect on how they have been loved and cared for by our church. Then, we commission them by having the church lay hands on them, pray for them and welcome them into the adult community. It is an amazing service, and I am always reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness. Our church is reminded as well of God's goodness and faithfulness through their love and support of student ministry.

Like you, I still have students who don't do any of the things I encourage them to do, show up here and there, and end up being amazing followers of Christ. I still have students who are totally committed to everything we do as a student ministry and choose to walk away from Christ. But one of the transitions we have seen is, when students return from college, their gathering place is in big church, not outside the youth room. Big church cannot only be for adults. We must help our students develop that habit. I said at the beginning, the spiritual development of students is a mysterious balance between us planning and watering, and God causing growth. I do think we make God's job harder if we cut the legs out from the church instead of helping students find their rightful place in the larger body of Christ.

We give our students an amazing gift when we give them the tools and habits to develop their faith into adulthood within the adult worshipping community. It is then they have the best chance for loving Jesus for the long haul.

> **Section 4** +Discerning Your Issues

What a youth worker and an algebra 1 teacher have in common:

As a youth pastor, one of my favorite times of the year is graduation. I love the pomp and circumstance as friends, family, and fellow youth pastors gather in the stands at the local high school celebrating this amazing milestone of our students.

Over the past few years I've been contemplating my job as youth pastor and the role I play in the lives of my students - these soon to be graduates. And in my thinking, I saw the way these teachers went about their work as so different from the way I work as a youth pastor. These educators would teach history, chemistry, or algebra and then simply pass their students on to the next class. I looked at the way I went about my work as youth pastor in a completely different manner.

I had been tasked with the God-given role of being spiritual mentor to these students for their high school careers, and maybe even for their entire lives! But the more I reflected on the role of the teacher and the role of the youth pastor, I've come to realize that my desire to be the number one spiritual mentor for my students for high school and beyond is well intentioned. But it's not very realistic! Here's what I've come to realize . . .

Those teachers who sit in the first few rows at the graduation ceremonies? The way they teach teenagers is actually pretty close to the way we teach teenagers.

Take the average Algebra I teacher. Algebra I gets a bad rap. It can be pretty boring and it at least seems irrelevant to the normal world. It's pretty easy for most students to check out of Algebra. Maybe they squeak by with a C. The problem is, in reality, Algebra is the lynch pin for future academic success! It's the foundation on which future math classes are based. And since math is a key subject toward graduating high school and college, Algebra I is pretty important.

A good Algebra teacher teaches the subject with clarity and passion. He or she understands the role, and knows that if students never get Algebra, they won't be as successful in their education. And for the few students who will fall in love with math and want to pursue it in college and maybe as a

career, it will have been the Algebra I teacher who set the stage for it to happen.

Unfortunately for the average Algebra I teachers, they don't seem to receive much credit. They teach the basic class to all freshmen in high school. When they do their job well, it's the Calculus teacher (years later) who sees the fruit. But here's what I think. I think Algebra I teachers understand this. I think they find joy in it.

They love that they set a firm foundation and someone else builds on it - and that the result is a student who thrives academically.

Which leads me back to me - and to you, for that matter. If we faithfully fill our roles, we should be launching students into college with a firm foundation of faith, ready to spiritually thrive and connect with new Christian leaders. When students come back for Christmas or summer break; and speak of the brilliance of their college pastor, or how a certain author is rocking their world, we can't be jealous or insecure. Rather, we should be like the Algebra I teacher, finding joy that the foundation we laid has been built upon by another...

...And that an amazing "house" is coming together for the glory of God.

"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." 1 Corinthians 3:5

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Don't be too quick to ditch cheesy Christianity.

Having little kids has been a challenge this Christmas season. And the challenge has not been so much about trying to navigate the Santa vs. No Santa debate. The challenge came as I wrestled with how much cheese I was willing to serve up for my kids this Christmas in the form of Christmas stories, books, music and movies.

Everything in me is repulsed by the cheese. In fact, I used to think it was actually offensive to Jesus Christ himself. But as I watch the fruit of hipster parents who are too cool for cheese lived out in their children, the students in our ministry, I am starting to second-guess my offense.

> I Hate the Cheese!

For me - and maybe you - we think certain things are hip, cool, cultured, and deep. And while these things may be true, this truth is completely lost on our kids. It seems every Christmas, more and more effort is made toward finding ways to make the story of Christmas somehow new and relevant. But the more we do this, the less of the original, simple, and true story gets passed down from one generation to the next.

As I experienced Christmas through the lens of a seven year old, I was amazed at how the old, boring, cheesy movies on TV shared the values and virtues of Christmas; even though they contained Claymation Santa's and Rudolphs. Every current show and TV special had nothing to do with Jesus (which is what you would expect). But if you watched closely, they even had nothing to do with the virtues or values like love, peace, hope, and joy.

> A Non PC Sidebar:

As a sidebar, it is interesting to me that the more philanthropic our culture seems to be with Ethos water and Toms shoes, the more selfishness, pride and envy rules on a personal level. On some levels, righteousness is a culture defined. We have gone from a righteousness of personal purity to righteousness as defined as philanthropic, liberal, and sustainable. Oh how scary it will be if we are outwardly righteous, but were simply whitewashed tombs. I think Jesus had some choice words for those in that camp.

> **Back to my Point:**

We are getting zero help from our culture at large in passing on the Christian story. This means we have to get back to our roots, get back to the simple story, the cheesy cartoons and the old school songs. As parents and leaders of children and students we must not deprive them of the vital foundational stories and songs that form the bedrock of faith. We must not forego sharing the simple Gospel, the basic disciplines, and black and white boundaries. As they grow and develop, those will grow with them.

This idea may chafe on us because our faith expression has moved passed some of this and we crave some deeper expressions of faith. Since we are adults, this is good and correct. However, if we treat their faith like we treat them, as mini-adults, they will lose out on both; becoming well balanced, healthy adults as well as people with mature and deep faith in Jesus Christ.

For too long we have put our faith and our issues on our students. We must become mature in our own faith and differentiate our own journey from those of early and mid-adolescents. Don't be fooled by their cool exterior. Give them what they need, not what you need. I am willing to bet that what they need is some more basic, black and white, cheesy Christianity!

Bring on the cheese!

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Can't BIG FUN still be in style?

> I believe Big Fun is still in style. Here's what I mean . . .

In many of the youth ministry circles in which I travel, there seems to be a growing wave of opinion that the days of big, fun, programmed youth ministry are over. To take students and run them around a gym, coaxing them into embarrassing, gross, silly, and most of all fun games is no longer in vogue or relevant. The logic seems to be that today's teenagers have no taste for goofing off.

> The argument I often hear is that these are young adults who care more about lofty ideas than they do simple-minded and immature pursuits.

I believe all Christians should lean into the pursuit of deep concepts. And I think this is something we should definitely lead our students into. I simply don't believe that the pursuit of a deeper faith and goofing off are mutually exclusive.

> What if students aren't the ones changing? What if it's us?

As the ranks of my colleagues who value Big Fun wither, I've noticed an emerging common trend. As youth ministry has become firmly established as a "profession", youth workers are staying in their jobs longer, education is increasing, and the age of the average youth worker seems to be greatly advancing. It's far more common to be at a network gathering and find more youth workers over 30 than under. This didn't seem as common a decade ago.

With youth workers aging, is it possible that the passions, desires, and energy in which goes into the job dramatically changes? The older I get the more I'm interested in global issues and local impact. I want a life and a ministry that's integrated, and making an impact with more than just suburban middle class kids. Compared to these new things God is doing in my life, setting up a marshmallow war just doesn't seem to pack the same punch.

As we get older, we can't forget that the age of the students to whom we minister stays the same. We will always be working with 11-18 year olds. Because of this reality, we must differentiate between the things God is doing in our lives and what God is doing in the lives of our students. When we step back and take our own desires out of the equation, I think it becomes clear. There is plenty of room for Big Fun.

Here Are Two Reasons I Think Big Fun Is Vital To Student Ministry:

1. **It's developmentally appropriate:** Working with youth feels closer to working with children than with college students. They're at the beginning of becoming adults, but they seem to, developmentally, exist more in "kid world". They need space to goof off and have fun. Very rarely in their lives are they encouraged to have fun for the sake of it. Their lives are regimented, their sports are competitive, and they are asked to deal with situations and information far beyond their capabilities. When we give them space to fully be themselves, to be kids and to play, we're giving them an important and unique gift.
2. **It's an easy way for students to interact with one another:** Increasingly, our students live more and more isolated lives. They are losing the art of communicating with one another face-to-face. One of the most amazing gifts we can give our students is the opportunity to build friendships and build community. We tend to think deep, emotional conversation is the only way to do this. The truth is, running around, being light-hearted, and laughing breaks down walls and provides genuine opportunities for friendship and community. Students need to make friends and feel loved. Big Fun is one of the most effective ways of pulling this off.

I'm glad churches value older youth workers. The wisdom and expertise a veteran youth worker brings to a youth program is a total gift.

But as we age, we must not forget that the students whose lives we impact are not.

They will forever be 11-18. They will forever be kids becoming adults. And they will forever need Big Fun!

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Who carries your burden?

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

> **The Joys of Transparency**

We had the most amazing time at summer camp this year! For the first time ever we were able to be truly deep and authentic with one another. On Thursday night, "Cry Night", the speaker talked about bearing with one another, carrying each other's burdens. After his moving talk, he sent us back to our cabins to share burdens with one another. Normally, I just facilitate this sort of conversation, but I was really feeling the Holy Spirit move and decided to go first to set the tone.

I knew I was really connecting with the students because for the first time in a long time, they really listened to me. The more they leaned in, the more I shared, and the more I shared, the more I realized I had to share.

It all began quite surfacey, with me sharing about how stressed I was feeling trying to juggle this job and my family. Then I decided to get a little more specific.

"My boss doesn't think I am doing a good enough job because our numbers are down this year. And because of that I have been working so much, I am becoming more and more disconnected from my wife. My boss, our pastor, is not just a tough boss, but a total jerk. I know he seems great on Sunday mornings, but working for him is a nightmare. In fact I don't even know how much more I can take working in this environment. On top of our pastor sucking and sucking the life from me, my wife seems to only nag and complain. She says that I am not around enough, I am always hanging out with students, and she not only resents me because of it, but resents you too. There is so much resentment, we haven't even had sex for months. This has lead me to become addicted to internet porn and gambling. I don't know if we need to go to counseling or what. And to top it all off, this stress combined with my sin is impacting my faith. I can't remember the last time I had a quiet time. And really, ever since my son has been sick, I have been pissed at God for abandoning me and jacking my life, my marriage, and my job. Really, what am I doing anyway?!"

For being middle school boys, they took all of this really well.

> Where Do You Go?

I hope you could tell this conversation was make-believe. Because the truth is, I would never share any of this with middle school boys, and I would for sure never share this in a public arena such as a blog or a book.

While this conversation is fake, the issues are real among many ministry leaders. Because ministry leaders are also broken people, issues will arise that will test the faith, ministries, and marriages of people in ministry. The real question is not how to prevent these issues from arising, but, “Where do I go when the bottom starts to fall out in my job, my marriage, or my faith?” This is a question of vital importance for me and, I think, for anyone who wants to make it in ministry for the long term.

Just because we’re ministry leaders does not mean we’re above the dark underbelly of life and faith. The danger is, if we do not have an appropriate outlet for these issues we actually end up developing split personalities; and before long, become straight-up hypocrites. With so much on the line, where do you go to work this out? Who are your people?

As I’ve tried to work this out in my own life, I have realized my pastor / boss isn’t the right person; my spouse isn’t always the right person; my friends in the church aren’t the right people; and, for sure, my students are never the right people on whom to lay my burdens. There is one place I have landed where I have found friends with whom I can share my burden. These friends have all come from my ministry network meetings.

> Thank God For My Network:

In some seasons these were people from my local network. But in this season they are from my denominational clusters. No matter which network from which you grab your people, your network is your best bet for some authentic living and burden sharing. Who else gets the joys and sorrows, the stress and anxiety of youth ministry, than others who are right in the middle of it?

As I prepare to head off to an annual retreat for youth workers in my conference, I realize I’m about to spend time with my people; people who get me, get my ministry - true colleagues. What makes this time the most valuable for me is, I am with people who can bear my burdens or whose burdens I may have the honor to bear.

My prayer for you is that you find some colleagues with whom you can be real, lay it down, and whom you would trust to carry your burdens. If these people are not in your life, at some point there will be a straw that will break your back and crush your life, your family, your ministry, or all three. May God bless you as you share your burdens; and may God continue to be gracious as we work all this out.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

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Numbers: the most important indicator of ministry health

When I meet a fellow youth worker, the most pressing question I have is, “How many kids are in their youth group?” and the answer to this question dictates my emotional state for the rest of the conversation. Now, don’t get me wrong. I may care about many other things but this question is always somewhere in my not-so sub-conscience. However, maybe I have been trained to think this way since it seems like every conversation I have with my colleagues, supervisor or parents all seem to circle around one main topic: Numbers.

> Whether or not we want to admit it, the numbers of students in our ministry is important - and maybe the most important fact of our ministry.

The reason numbers are so important is because they are the only real facts we have to evaluate. How many students have come to our programs and attend big church? How do those numbers compare to last year. Unfortunately, there is no way to really evaluate the deeper and more “spiritual” aspects to our ministry. How can we really tell if students are growing in their walk with Jesus? How can we really tell how many of our students have made decisions to become Christians? How can we tell if any of our students are following Jesus when they graduate from high school, into college and adulthood? We can’t. So we are left with numbers.

But before we freak out and bash on the culture of success or growth; or blame our pastors, church boards, or parents for only caring about numbers - or write off using numbers as an indicator as simply being unspiritual - maybe we should live into the reality that numbers are important. And they aren’t just important. They are very important. We can’t even get to the importance of using numbers as a true measurement tool until we own some of the reasons we push pack so hard against this rubric. So, what are some of these reasons?

- We don’t want to be judged. Nobody wants to be judged. It is humbling to be evaluated and come up wanting. We never want to be

evaluated. Unless we know we are going to get positive marks, we never want feedback. To get a “needs improvement” grade cuts to the core of who we are. We pour our entire lives into our students and our ministry; and it is too painful to hear we might not be cutting it.

- We think deep and wide cannot co-exist. When our group is not growing and /or we are not meeting the expectations of others for growth, we tell ourselves our group is deep. Our focus is on discipleship. Those other youth groups are shallow and just fun. That is why they are growing. But the truth is, I have seen fun seeker style youth groups struggle to reach critical mass; and fundamentalist Pentecostal churches, the biggest ministry in town.
- Numbers are not spiritual. Jesus had 12 disciples. This is such a narrow view of scripture and Jesus’ ministry. It is like saying we want a New Testament church, like in Acts. But what about the church in Corinth? Yes, Jesus poured his life into the 12. But there were also the 72, all the women, and let’s not forget the multitudes. Jesus had a huge earthly ministry. He was truly able to find the balance of casting the net as wide as possible and discipling a small group of people to continue his ministry.

> If we can get to a place where we’re not writing off numbers and welcome evaluation, we can actually learn a lot about our ministry. Being focused on numbers often reveals:

- Our group may be too much like us. Anyone can collect a small group of people who have similar interests and passions. There will always be at least a group of students who like what you like, connect with God the way you connect with God, and even think your jokes are funny. I have met many good-hearted youth workers who can only connect to students if they fit a certain mold. We usually call that mold “deep”. But what it really means is, we have written off the 90% of students who aren’t like us.
- Our leadership development may be lacking. It is true. We can only really care for a small group of students. The second our ministry grows past ten students, we begin to struggle. There are plenty of students out there who want and need to be loved on and cared for by

adults; and it is actually our job as vocational youth workers to inspire, train, equip, and empower others for ministry. We go from a small ministry to a ministry of small groups; and we can actually multiply our effectiveness. Without developed leaders, our groups will never grow.

- We may have a lousy program. I know it is cool to hate programs. But claiming to be relational and not programmatic means you should probably just be a volunteer. Volunteers get to be relational. Vocational youth workers develop programs. Programs create structure for relationships to happen. If we have a lousy program, there is no way for people outside the small group of natural friendships to ever get connected and assimilated. In the short run, time developing programs do take away from relationship building. But in the long run, an excellent program creates opportunities for a wide range of students to build relationships with you and your volunteer team.

- We may need to put more time and energy into follow up. The amount of new kids who come through a ministry in the course of a year is amazing. It is a tragedy how few of them stick around and become part of the group. If numerically growing our group mattered, we would differently approach the way we handle new kids.

Allowing numbers to shape our ministry is not a surrender to the forces of American-capitalistic-success-watered-down Christianity. Allowing numbers to shape our ministry is actually recognizing the passion, gifts, and values God has given you; and intentionally expanding a ministry around that. Numerically growing a ministry takes exactly that: Intentionality.

If your task was to grow your youth ministry by 20% this year, what are some things you would do different? What if your job was dependent upon it? This question is not a shot across the bow or a rebuke. This question forces action, and is one I have been wrestling with in my ministry. I do not work in a mega-church and my numbers are probably C at best.

But I do not want to be satisfied with that sort of ministry. In order to do a better job, I must develop a plan. But even an effective plan cannot happen with out an honest evaluation.

We cannot pretend numbers don't matter. So, let us not run from the brutal truth that numbers can expose in our ministries. Rather, let us welcome evaluation and take its conclusions as refinement. Instead of settling, let us

re-engage our community and strive to bring as many kids into the kingdom of God as possible. With the thousands of students in our communities, it is a given there are at least 10-20 of them out there who would thrive by being a part of our ministry. What would it look like if we cared about numbers and used our gifts, talents, resources, and creativity to track down, love on, and hold on to those new students? Let's find out!

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An open letter to my pastor

Dear Pastor,

I am writing you because I am dying. I know it probably doesn't look like it but I am alone and withering on the vine.

I came to this job excited about starting in this new ministry position. I showed up on a spiritual high and with high expectations of all the ways that God was going to move in this ministry; and things have been going great. But as these months have started to add up, I have been noticing things aren't quite right in my soul.

My initial excitement was great and spurred me to work hard and with expectations. It pushed me into new relationships and these relationships have been great. I feel like I connect well with students and their parents seem to respect me. But there is still this void.

What I have been realizing is, although I appear to be in the middle of community, I actually have no community. I meet regularly with the youth workers in our area. But there seems to always be turnover and one or two new people show up every meeting. So, we are always getting to know each other. I meet regularly with students. But I am their pastor. I have good relationships with their parents. But it is within the context of their children. I have gotten to know many people at the church and have even developed some good friendships. But there always seems to be a barrier with them. I am on staff at this church and, whether I like it or not, my relationship with people is affected by this fact.

My closest friend at the church has bottomed out in their marriage and all of the sudden I became not just their friend, but also their pastor. The dynamics of our friendship have now changed dramatically. Now, don't get me wrong, I am truly honored to be welcomed into the darkest parts of people lives and humbled to play a part of the healing process. But this friendship is not community. It is work.

Ministry is a lonely profession. And I know I don't need to tell you this. You have been a pastor longer than I have been alive. You have seen more tragedy and broken relationships than I could ever imagine. Of all people at our church, I would think you would feel even more isolated from community than me. Our church is your herd of sheep. You carry emotional

and spiritual responsibility for the well being of your flock. How do you do it alone?

I have only been doing this ministry thing for a short amount of time and I am already dying. That is why I am writing this letter.

As I have been reading though the Gospels I have noticed, again, for the first time how often Jesus left the crowds and his disciples to be alone. Or, at least, that is what I always thought. He went to spend time in prayer, spend time with the Father. But as I have been thinking about this more and more, he withdrew because the crowds and even the disciples were not his community. They were his ministry. His community is being a part of the Trinity, being united to the Father and the Spirit. It is the community of the Trinity where Jesus received all he needed to continue his ministry on earth. The Trinity at the core of its being is united in love and purpose.

Now, not to take this illustration too far, but I think we as a staff could learn something from the Trinity. Our church is not our community. It is our ministry. But we are called to be in community. And what I am proposing is, our community needs to be with each other. We are both working at this church, we both want God's best for this place, and we are both alone in this job. But for this to work, we need to be able to share vision for this church.

I confess I have probably been more of a thorn in your side than a partner in ministry. It is so easy for me to get excited and be pushy about things of which I know little, or to get frustrated when things move slowly in the larger church, or acknowledge your style of worship is different than mine. I am sorry. I know we have different ministry styles and probably even different visions for the direction of the church. But God has not called me to be the pastor of this church. He has called you to that role. My job is to be your partner in ministry and bring the youth ministry alongside your vision for ministry in this place.

I am willing to submit to your authority and vision for the church. At the same time, I want to be your partner in ministry. Even more than that, I want us to be friends; to be community; to share our joys and struggles; to complain about those frustrating people at church; to weep for those who have fallen away in their faith; and celebrate the return of the prodigal. I want to be a blessing to you and you to me.

I know this sounds strange, but I am willing to take a stab at it. I know for this to work, I need to be a blessing to you and not a person about whom you go and complain to your pastor buddies. Here I am; take me under your wing; and let's go. Let's do the great things God has for this place. Let's do it together.

Sincerely,

Your partner, fan, friend

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Leadership is not the main job or calling of a youth worker

Over and over, I listen to youth workers who are so frustrated with their senior pastor, supervisor, and parents because they just don't seem to understand or respect the youth workers' leadership. The more I listen to my friends, the more I am convinced of the reason: Leadership is not the primary calling. In fact, it's not even in the top ten of values and skills; or even the responsibility of a youth worker.

Unfortunately, many youth workers are young, educated, and look up to strong leaders who write extensively about leadership. But these authors and pastors are **LEAD** pastors. Crazy, they are the leaders of their churches and organizations. Even in their churches they hire people to **FOLLOW THEIR LEADERSHIP**. In fact, most youth workers in those larger churches lead significantly less than those youth workers in smaller churches. They fully get who the leader is and where they sit in the org chart.

The truth is, youth ministry is near the bottom of the org chart in most churches. For many of us, it is an entry-level position.

Isn't it strange, we put on this gigantic mantle of leadership and significance to an entry-level position where the youngest and least experienced pastors do their work?

I am in no way belittling the work done by youth workers. I am a youth worker and have been one for a long time. I am simply offering a small correction. Leadership is not what we are called to do. We are called to love students and help them love Jesus. We take our marching orders from our lead pastors. Our stance towards parents is one of service. Yes, we may lead a game, give a talk, and **LEAD** a small group. But whatever leadership we have is tempered by fulfilling the leadership goals and dreams of our **LEAD** pastor.

As a side note, don't be too quick to blow off your old, tired, lame, lead pastor and their **LEADERSHIP**. They actually may know more than you think. You would benefit by submitting to their leadership. And if you

can't, it is time for you to leave and work for a **LEADER** you can submit to.

Youth ministry is not the place where young bucks LEAD! It is the place where people are called to serve and care for a particular niche within the church body. We are a small part of the larger church team and in this position we submit to our LEAD pastor, SERVE our parents, and LOVE our students.

Just a thought 😊

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The secret to connect with any student

Who are the students with whom you naturally connect? Chances are, they are students who share similar stories, experiences or interests. If you expand the circle even larger, I bet most of the people in your life are also ones who share similar stories, experiences or interests. This is just part of the human condition. There are people with whom we just naturally click. We get used to hanging out and joking with people like us - which is great for building friendship among our peers - but means we are a little out of practice when it comes to getting to know new people; especially people with whom we have nothing in common.

Because we are out of practice, it can be really intimidating to try and connect with students who are nothing like you. For me, it often feels like the less I have in common, the harder it is to connect. But I think the inverse of this rule might actually be true. The less you have in common with students, the better chance you have to make a genuine connection.

The awful reality is, students don't really care about us adults, our stories, our likes or dislikes. They could care less what music we like or teams for which we cheer. We get so used to sharing our story and thinking students like to hear from us, we miss the most important truth.

> The Truth: Students want to share their stories and passions - and they want us to respond with love and acceptance.

Having nothing in common with students is actually the best starting point. Everyone loves talking about themselves. This is for sure true for us adults, but even more true for students. When we have nothing in common, we are forced to do what we should be doing all along - asking questions. The less you know or understand a student, the more questions you will have. The more questions you have, the more the student is going to have the opportunity to share their story, and to be seen and heard by a loving adult.

It is difficult to get our heads around the idea that our stories, jokes and interests are of little concern or value to students. But what we have to offer them with our questions and our genuine interest is of so much more value. We get to be adults who actually see students, to love them for who they are and where they are. It isn't helpful when students feel the pressure to fit in and perform in one more setting.

Asking questions and getting to know students is our number one task as volunteers and youth staff. It is only when students feel seen that they can feel cared for. It is only after they feel cared for will they be willing to wrestle with the deeper things of life and faith with you.

It is normal and natural for people to collect themselves around common stories, experiences and interests. Students do this naturally. We do too. But as adult youth staff our job is to connect with all of our students; even the ones with whom we have nothing in common. Instead of this being an intimidating or scary task, it actually gets to be a great reminder that it is not about us at all. It is about them and their stories. **And the secret with connecting with any student is to simply ask questions.**

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Ten ways to stay hip and relevant

The number one question I get asked by people young and old is, “Ben, how do you stay so hip and relevant?” People look at me, watch me in action and cannot believe a man in his late 30’s is so cool and has such a bead on the youth culture. Just to prove it, I downloaded Rebecca Black’s song from iTunes last week when there were less than 1,000,000 hits on Youtube.

So, instead of hoarding all my best tricks to myself, I thought I would pass on my list of top ten ways I stay right in the middle of mainstream youth culture. Giddy up!

10. Realize you are not hip: The sad, sad, truth is, no student thinks I am hip and relevant. They pity me and think it is cute that I try so hard. The only people who think I am “with it” are other adults who are old and un-hip too. You see - we are adults. And because we are adults, we are immediately excluded from the youth cultural world. This means, the more we try, the more we come off like posers.

But in an attempt to understand their world and context, and the stories that shape them, it is vital for us to be aware of and engage culture. We do this to understand our students, to have touch points with them, and to hopefully find those “thin places” where the Gospel story can connect with their cultural story. With that being said, here are some of my tricks.

9. Subscribe to Entertainment Weekly. This is the best \$20 you could ever spend. It is impossible to be current with all the music, movies and TV shows out there. We are busy with our lives and the media we like. It is painful for me to listen to my students’ music. But Entertainment Weekly is a once-per-week summary of what is going on in the world of pop culture. Instead of you relying on what you think is cool and relevant - which is never a good call - we get to rely on the people who actually define it for our students to give us the scoop.

8. Do a media survey and series at youth group: Our students consume media at an amazing rate. If we can’t beat them with the movies and music they consume, let’s join them. Have them fill out an

anonymous survey to find out their favorite songs, movies, TV shows and websites. Then spend a month or so examining their media through a biblical worldview. Walt Mueller has amazing tools for this and is a great resource. Plus, you now have access to all the media your students love the most. By researching this series you will get a crash course of what is hip and connecting to your students right now.

7. Spend a workday at the mall food court: It is so easy for us to spend our time doing great work, but separated from the culture of our students. Sure, we go to games and hang out on campus. But this is with a purpose to connect with students. We bring an agenda when we do this. By bringing your work to the food court, spending the day working and people-watching, you get to be a social scientist as you simply observe the media and materialistic world in which our students bathe. Check out the people, stores, advertisements and music. Advertisers know our students better than we do. So, let's see what itch they are trying to scratch.

6. iTunes top ten: I realized something the other day. My favorite playlist contains songs that are 15 years old, on average. The songs I love and are meaningful for me are old! But because they are my songs, I have no desire to listen to the radio for hours and hours attempting to learn the latest and greatest music. iTunes does the work for me. Every week, I check in with the list and listen to one or two of the songs. As you become familiar with the music and artists, you will listen differently to your students and be able to pick up on the music they love the most. It is like learning a new language. The more you are familiar with the artists and the songs, the more you recognize in the world around you. These are the songs students sing along to, are featured on Glee and American Idol, and play in the mall.

5. Watch some of the shows your students watch: Most of us have our own shows we like and to which we are committed. But these shows are what adults like, not necessarily what students like. After you have given your students a survey, you will know what TV shows they like best. Pick one a week or so to watch. This is a fast and easy way to familiarize yourself with the stories and jokes which form most of their lighthearted conversation.

4. Have your students make a playlist for road-trips: Of course, you have to be sensitive to your context and convictions, but this is an amazing tool for connecting with students. Believe it or not, Christian music is the smallest amount of media your students consume. So, instead of making them live two lives, we can help bridge their two lives into one. By making the music they love become the soundtrack to an amazing youth group experience, you are actually changing the emotional connections to those songs. Now when they hear a particular song on the radio or in their iPod, those songs are connected to the memories of a great trip.

3. Go to the movies: Most students are not very creative. So when they want to get together and do something as a group, movies usually are at the top of the list. Because of all your research, you will know what movies are big and have been seen or at least talked about by most of your students. Take some petty cash and go and see it in the middle of your workday. Check out the commercials at the beginning, previews and the movie itself. These are the stories shaping their worldview. When we are aware of them, we get to use these stories to tell the ultimate story. It is time to put to death Star Wars, Batman, Matrix, and Brave-Heart illustrations. We can only do this when we understand their stories.

2. Ask for help: Like I said at the beginning, our students know we are not hip. When we try, we come off like idiots. My favorite trick is my ownership of being a poser, and clueless about their world. I ask questions about their world and the media that shapes it. I ask them what songs they like and why, or to help me understand the appeal of certain movies. Not knowing pop culture gets to be a plus when we allow students to be the experts at something and we become the student. I have found that students love to share their world with me. It just takes me being humble and asking questions.

1. At the end of the day, IT DOESN'T MATTER: What is so amazing about student ministry is that our main job is to simply love students. And not just love students in the macro sense of the word - but love actual, individual, unique, amazing students. It is helpful to understand their world and their context. More than anything, students need to be seen and cared for. Understanding their world or at least

being interested in their world is a great way to begin conversation and friendship.

The awful truth is, we are not hip or cool. And what makes matters worse, when we actually try to use our knowledge of pop culture to get main street cred and be cool we actually do a disservice. Students spend their entire lives jockeying for position and status. When we become one more relationship where they have to perform and be hip, we take away the beauty of what makes student ministry so amazing. Our job is to be a safe adult; an adult who cares about them and their world; someone who doesn't judge or humiliate them. Understanding culture and being relevant is just a tool. It is a good tool, but only one of many.

No matter what tools we have in our box, let us continue to strive with all our hearts to be youth workers who work hard at knowing and loving our students so they will somehow be connected to the One who knows and loves them completely.

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Who is Apollos?

> **Guess What? It's Not About You!**

A call to student ministry is a special and unique thing. We have been called by God to participate in the spiritual development of students. For a very specific and often chaotic season, we get the privilege and honor of being adults who coach, mentor, disciple and journey with adolescents who are exploring their faith and making it their own. What could be greater? As we attempt to live this out in the real world with real students in a real context, this simple yet profound calling gets blurry.

The students with whom we work have joys and concerns, victories and losses, growth and setbacks. We attempt to be there for every student for every part of the roller coaster ride; and while we work our guts out, pouring our lives into these students, our vision becomes impaired. Because very slowly, without us knowing, the joy that comes from getting to be there for students and walk with them turns - and starts to become about us. Instead of being an adult who journeys with students for a season of their lives, we see ourselves as the adult who journeys with them, advocates for them, loves them, who will get them through adolescence and solve their problems, etc.

It is not a difficult leap to inflate the role we have in the lives of students. We give so much of our selves to them - and in return we are part of such intimate and transforming events and conversations. We get to be a part of genuine transformation. Take these intense moments, add the already emotionally charged reality of adolescence, and it is easy to see ourselves as the lynchpin holding it all together.

Lately, this blurry lens through which I have been viewing my ministry has had a refreshing cleansing. This cleaning happened at an unlikely place this spring: graduation.

> **A Clarifying Event: Graduation**

I didn't plan on a graduation ceremony being the place where God was going to do a fresh work in me. In fact, I approached the day with zero expectations. Through the years, I have gotten graduations down to a science. In fact, this year I managed to attend five graduations in a single

day. Coming for the beginning, taking pictures, hugging parents, saying hi to kids I hadn't seen in years, giving a nod to the other youth workers doing the same thing, jumping in the car to catch the end of the graduation across town and repeat. As the day unfolded and I listened to speech after speech, student after student progress across the podium, I saw something I'd never seen before.

For the first time, I looked past the students and saw the teachers, principals and administrators; and what I saw was amazing. I saw dozens of faculty sit back and watch the fruit of their labor graduate - move from one season of life to the next - with joy and pride. What was unique in this picture for me is that it is not one person or teacher who propels a student to graduation. It is 12 years of teachers, principals, and administrators who have faithfully done their part; which culminates in a graduation. As quickly as graduation started, it ended. The students left empowered and launched to whatever new thing they were going to do. While the students left for graduation parties and new lives, teachers returned to their classrooms to clean up and prepare for a brand new group of students to educate and faithfully begin the process all over again.

This is exactly what Paul was talking about in [1 Corinthians 3](#). In Corinth, there was some grumbling going on about who their true spiritual leader was. Some people thought it was Paul, others Apollos. Paul's focus was on helping the people see that it is not the work of the leader, but the work of God that should be our focus. Paul draws a line in the sand with his confrontational question, "Who is Apollos? Who is Paul?"

> **How Much Influence Do We Really Have?**

This question cuts to the heart of student ministry and confronts some of the false versions of ministry while the rest of the passage actually gives us a healthy view of starting, ending and continuing to do faithful student ministry in a particular context.

Paul's questions strike the heart of one of the most challenging issues in student ministry: The personality-driven ministry. Because many of us use our relational and leadership gifts well, we find success in collecting and gathering students. Without realizing what we have done, we have managed to collect students to us. If this goes unchecked, this version of ministry puts an enormous stumbling block in front of our students.

Students are not the ones trying to pick one person to be their be all end all in life. Students intuitively know there should be a collection of people who have molded and shaped them. If we move from seeing ourselves as adults to seeing ourselves as the adult, we put students in a challenging position.

When we arrive in a new context, we don't need to be intimidated by the history that happened without us; with the jokes and the stories. Shutting those down, belittling the person and program before us, ignoring the parents and volunteers who have served faithfully long before we arrived on the scene actually cheapens what we currently are trying to do. This alienates our older students whose hearts are deeply imbedded with those leaders and staff with whom they have history, as well as shuts down those leaders and opens the door for grumbling and conflict.

We cannot forget God has been working in the lives of these students long before we showed up, and will continue to work in their lives long after we are gone. Are we mature enough to live into the question that Paul poses? "Who is Apollos, and who is Paul?" Paul goes on to remind, encourage and rebuke us:

"My job was to plant the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it; but it was God, not we, who made it grow. The ones who do the planting or watering aren't important, but God is important because He is the One who makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work as a team with the same purpose. Yet they will be rewarded individually, according to their own hard work. We work together as partners who belong to God. You are God's field, God's building, not ours" ([1 Cor. 3:6-9](#)).

> **Our Task is Clear:**

What a helpful picture Paul paints for serving in a ministry context. Whether we are new, leaving or staying put, our job is clear. We plant where there has been no seed planted. We water the work that has been done before us. We prepare our students to continue to grow when they move past our ministries. There is no glory in the planting and watering. It is the humble task of the youth worker. This faithful work - partnering with the power and purposes of God - is what causes growth and produces fruit.

Thankfully, it is not all about us. Actually, it is not about us at all. It is Jesus who is the Author and Perfector of our faith. It is Jesus who has the

mysterious power for growth and transformation. These students are God's building, God's field. While God doesn't need us, He invites us into a partnership. Out of His grace and mercy He allows us to participate with what He is doing.

We give all of our hearts to our students. We sacrifice time and money for them. We listen to them, celebrate, and journey with them. Even the words "our students" are said with affection and the amount of love and care we have for them. But we only do this for a time - and rightly so because these students are not our building or field. They are God's building and field. The more we can live into that truth, the more we start well, end well and serve faithfully for years to come.

The principles, administrators and teachers at the local high school graduation have it right. Graduation marks the end of part of a journey and the beginning of a new one. They all gather together and celebrate the students. They understand they play an important part in the development of the students, but only a part. Because they understand this, they genuinely are excited for students who are being launched into a new season of life. They are just as excited for the new students who will enter their classrooms the following year.

What a great reminder that's available every spring. Instead of racing from graduation to graduation, making sure I am seen and students and parents know I care for them, I can sit back with pride and watch the fruit of our labor cross the stage. What a great discipline to join with the teachers, principles and administrators and recognize we are only part of the process. Specifically, on a spiritual level, we may plant and water. But it is God who causes the growth. For who is Apollos? Who is Paul? Who am I? I am only a small part of each student's life for a short season. Because of that, I faithfully will do my part for this time and place, finding joy as God causes the growth in students before me, with me and long after me.

> **Bonus Section 5** +AYM nuts
and bolts

Irreducible Complexity in Student Ministry

There are so many great things we do in student ministry. But so much of what we do is simply an add-on to the fundamental core values of student ministry. The challenge is to separate out what is the irreducible complexity in student ministry and what are simply the add-ons.

Now, don't get me wrong. It is the add-ons, amenities, and the style points that make your ministry uniquely yours. These are probably what you are known and affirmed for in your ministry. But if we are not careful, we lose focus and make the amenities the main things. What we really want to do is firmly understand the core values of student ministry. From that foundation, we can build whatever stylized and culturally appropriate ministry we have been dreaming about!

When you take away the fog machine, the funny video, the dinner together, the lesson, small groups, goofy game, artistic paintings, etc, what is left? What are the core values that must be present in any solid and thriving ministry? Irreducible Complexity is the bare minimum requirements for something to work. And in student ministry, there are three: Inviting Community; Transformational Relationships; and Incarnation Engagement.

> **Inviting Community:**

We all love the word community and we all suck at living it out. I think this is because at the end of the day, we just want to be with people like us. But once you move past your one or two good friends, everyone else is different, weird, and not worthy of our time. Unfortunately, this minimalistic approach to friendship is not what Jesus has called us into.

Our students are alienated and separated from just about everybody and everything. Many of them have difficult home lives; and even their small friendship circles are perilous at best.

With clusters becoming more and more stylized and specific, building community is harder and harder. Just because it is difficult doesn't mean we should shy away from this task. We must find some new paradigms and pictures so we can take our unique and self-absorbed students and gather them in community.

Our students are alienated and separated from just about everybody and everything. Many of them have difficult home lives, and even their small friendship circles are perilous at best. And it is this felt reality of alienation and insecurity that we as the church have the opportunity to speak good news into. We profess a faith in Christ who sets up a huge banquet table, goes out into the streets and invites all people to sit around this table. When we gather, we are not a group of strangers, but are family.

Creating community, establishing safe space, welcoming every and all people despite background, socio-economic position, ability, hygiene, race, or sexual orientation is our starting point.

> **Transformational Relationships:**

It is our relationships that define, crush, and heal us. When we are in relationships with others who are healthy and full of love and grace, our entire person begins to heal. We recognize our worth and begin to realize we can actually be contributors to the group.

These relationships start with you and your adult staff. I know we want this transformational relationship to start with Jesus, but that is just not the case.

Students are not developmentally able to separate their faith from the faith community. How their Christian parents behave and relate to them - or how we as youth workers and youth staff relate to them - has a direct correlation to how they view God.

Jesus is invisible, an abstract, a complex being who is mysterious in all ways. A 15 year old is just beginning to understand and wrestle through abstract ideas and complex issues. Throw in raging hormones and Jesus doesn't really have a chance. Our student ministries become the bridge from the concrete issues and flannel graph version of faith towards a living and breathing relationship with our Creator. The health of these relationships starts with us. But we are only the shadow of the truly transformational relationship.

Whatever healing and wholeness comes out of healthy relationships, it is our connection to Jesus Christ, attachment to the true Vine where we will be healed and transformed. It is the Holy Spirit who causes fruit to grow. Unless we work like crazy to actually connect students to Jesus, it is all for nothing.

We spend so much time worrying about the fruit of the tree. We spend most of our time and energy with bandaids and short-term fixes. The fruit should not be our concern. The health of our roots is where we must invest.

Students need tools to develop a devotional life. They need quiet, conversation, and space to question and wrestle. They need someone to hold their hand, equip them, and encourage them to get after developing a friendship with God. We barely work on our root system, how can we expect our students to do it without our help, some real tools, and opportunity to try it out.

Bible information and sin management are important aspects, but must not be the main thing. The main thing is, making sure our students have opportunities to experience transformational relationships. These often start with your adult staff and you, but ultimately transition to their own thriving relationship with Jesus.

> **Incarnational Engagement:**

At the end of the day, the Christian life has less and less to do with us, and more and more to do with Jesus. We have been invited to be partners in ministry with Him. We have been given gifts and abilities to use in the expansion of His kingdom here on earth as it is in Heaven. Our faith is not simply about our own personal wholeness or transformation, but to be salt and light, ambassadors of reconciliation, and oozers of grace.

In our student ministries, we must make space in our curriculum and events calendar for students to try on the clothing of Christ and be his hands and feet; to partner with or initiate compassion and justice ministries on their own. We must create opportunities for them to experience the larger world, see where God is already on the move, partner with those who are caring for the least of these and standing up for the poor and oppressed. As our students develop hearts for this engagement, we must give them tools and empower them to do get after it. Instead of crushing their idealism, we must celebrate them developing a heart after the things of God.

But caring for others far away from us is not the only part of this idea. For us to truly be incarnational we must create space, teaching, correcting and opportunities for students to becoming the living embodiment of Jesus. This starts with our own personal holiness. Colossians talks about putting

to death our flesh and clothing ourselves in Christ. We cannot ignore sin, selfishness, pride, lust, sloth, anger, greed, envy, and gluttony. We need to give students tools and grace to confess and repent from it. True fruit happens as we prune. We can't just have love, mercy and grace without some heavy lifting as well.

Our incarnational engagement cannot end with personal righteousness. But it must be lived out in the world and in their world. Unless they are becoming more and more like Christ at home with their families, at their school and in their job, we are simply creating self-righteous hypocrites.

Integrating their faith and their real life is the ultimate goal of Christian discipleship. We cannot draw a line between sacred and secular. We must give them tools, space and plenty of grace for them to live into this reality.

It is not about being "good Christians" but about truly living into our new identity as the actual body of Jesus Christ.

> Sorry that was so long!

Michael Hyatt would be disappointed with the length of this post. But, thankfully, my mom and Ryan will read the entire thing 😊. After doing ministry for over 15 years, and trying every and all things for the sake of students and their walks with Jesus, I have come to the conclusion that at the end of the day, there are three non-negotiables in student ministry.

There are plenty of other things to do that are good, unique, cutting edge, and effective. But these three must not be compromised.

QUESTION: What are your core values in student ministry? Do you agree or disagree with mine? Good luck!

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Developing a ministry plan

> What Is Your Ministry Model?

I remember meeting with one of my interns at the end of her first week on the job. After attending the fall kick-off to our youth ministry year, she commented that our youth ministry was obviously a big fun Young Life model of student ministry. I was intrigued by the quick classification of my ministry by someone who had just shown up on the scene.

One of the things a B.A. in Youth Ministry provides for future interns and youth workers is a solid philosophy. And not just a firm philosophy - a solid model of ministry. The problem is, while developing a philosophy and model in a classroom, there is little space to consider other vital factors when determining which models to employ. One thing being a youth worker does is find the sweet spot where the philosophy and your unique context meet; allowing you to accomplish concrete ministry.

Ministry is not done in a vacuum or a classroom. It is done in an earthy context full of complexity. Because we are uniquely made, we all have different gifts, abilities and passions. When we combine our complex being with a very specific context, we are at the beginning place of determining a ministry philosophy and model.

I hate to break it to you, but there is no perfect model of ministry. Even what we consider the most solid and most biblical models out there are really our own interpretation of our favorite passages of scripture. Also, it is our determining how to live out these favorites scriptures in our specific context.

Have you ever considered that there are so many differing opinions on models, philosophies and methodologies of ministry because there are so many different people doing ministry? Of course, we should be well read and know what's out there - not in order to determine the purest methodologies, but to find the ones that best jive with who we were created to be and the place of ministry to which we're called.

> How Are You Wired?

It is the most common idea found in scripture, and yet one we often overlook. It can be found in both 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. It is the idea that we are the body of Christ. This is a no-brainer. Christ is the head and we all are different parts, none receiving any more glory than the other, all working together to accomplish the will of the head, Jesus Christ.

Yet the second we start to talk about ministry and models and philosophy, this basic teaching of scripture gets thrown out. All of a sudden we must all be certain parts of the body. Every church, every ministry must be about worship, discipleship, justice, missions, youth... you name it.

Instead of banging our heads against the wall, trying to live into a model of ministry that isn't quite "us" - or worse - being self-righteous about the way we have been made, insisting the part of the body of Christ we occupy is somehow better and more spiritual than the one someone else occupies. Have you ever considered there are a wide variety of churches, worship styles, youth ministries and youth ministry styles because we are all so different? And we all don't express our faith and the call God has put on our lives the same way?

> Where Do You Do Ministry?

Understanding the unique way you have been made by God, with all your unique passions and abilities, is still only half the answer. The second half of the answer is realizing you have been called to be a cross-cultural missionary. You, being fully you, must realize the church where you work and the town in which you live are your context for mission. If you just show up, taking all of who you are and drop it on your church or your context, it may get real ugly real fast.

To illustrate this point, think of all the times you have heard the glory stories of youth workers being fired. "We are such bad-asses because we are sticking to our guns and convictions, and our dumb church boards just don't love Jesus like we do." For the most part this is garbage. You have been called by God to bring all of who you are to a context. The sweet spot of ministry is taking all of who you are, and finding the thin places in your church and town where your unique call meshes with your context.

This is challenging work. There is a reason why missionaries are trained for years before they head out to the field. We are to be just as savvy. Unfortunately, my context is totally different than yours; and the way God made me is totally different than the way God made you. So the only way this works is by humbly searching the Heart of God, inviting true community in to help us discern what we are hearing, and finding colleagues who will encourage us along the way.

We youth workers are in dire need of those colleagues, who will hold a mirror up to us and our ministries, ask the hard questions, celebrate our victories and comfort us in our defeats. Youth ministry is not for the lazy; there is hard work to be done. Most of it needs to be done before we even have our first youth group.

> **Where I Land:**

I recognize there are many models and philosophies of youth ministry out there. I would love to know where you have landed and what seems to work for you in the context to which God has called you.

I live in a county that is fully post-Christian. There is no common Christian understanding or story. On an average Sunday morning, about two percent of our county ends up in church. Most churches in our area are in the 75-100 person range. Because of these factors, our students face some interesting issues.

There is no Christian subculture where I live. No Christian radio or bookstores, no Christian clubs on campus and, with the exception of Switchfoot, my students would be hard pressed to name one Christian artist. Because of the way God has made me, and the context in which I find myself, I have discovered a resource that has put words and structure to many of the things I had been doing and feeling in ministry. While the book is over ten years old now, it couldn't be more relevant for my context. It is called, The Celtic Way of Evangelism.

The simple model in this book is, evangelism in a pre-Christian context, (which also works for a post-Christian one) cannot be done on the foundational assumptions of a Christian context. For evangelism to work in a place where there are little-to-no touch points to the Gospel and the Christian life, we must reverse our old pattern.

Instead of getting people to believe in the Gospel, having their lives be sanctified and match their faith so that they would then be welcomed into community, we must turn that around. The Celtic Way of Evangelism says we invite everyone and anyone into our uniquely Christian community; and they belong no matter what they believe or how they behave. As they begin to belong we work out what they believe; and then we can help them have their lives and faith match up.

As I said before, this isn't the correct, biblical, or only way to do ministry. It is the way it works for the unique way God has made me - and with the unique church God has called me in the unique context in which we live. Please, please, please, share how you live out your calling in your context, your model, events, and lessons for your student ministry.

May God be gracious with us as we reengage our context as cross-cultural missionaries and develop our ministry plan for this upcoming year!

Coming up with a philosophy or model for ministry is the easy part in developing a ministry plan. Whether it is intuitive or researched, most of the youth workers I know have a school of ministry to which they subscribe. But often, when you take a closer look at what actually happens throughout the calendar year of their student ministry, the events seem to tell a different story.

Certain events seem to populate just about every youth ministry calendar.

While many of the reasons to do certain ones are good and even noble, rarely do they originate through the prism of a ministry model. It doesn't matter if you are a cell-based ministry, attractional, missional, purpose-driven or what; most likely, you have some combination of these events on your calendar:

- Retreats
- Movie Nights
- Scavenger Hunts
- Lock-Ins
- Service Projects
- Mission Trips
- Senior Celebrations
- BBQ's
- Pool / Lake Parties
- Camping Trips
- Road Trips
- Christian Concerts
- Christian Rallies
- See You At The Pole

- Something really creative. You are proud of it. Only you do it and won't share with others 😊

These events are staples because they are effective. And most of us can find some way to fit each of them into our model. But instead of starting with events - to be the most effective, we need to start with our plan.

Developing a solid ministry plan means we have to be proactive and intentional with the events we choose to do. There are a million great ideas - as well as some sacred cows - that all come into play when we put our calendar together. The trick is to pick activities which make sense within our model of ministry, context for ministry, and our unique passions. In order to pull this off, we need to fly back up to 30,000 feet and get some clarity regarding the model or philosophy of ministry we are trying to pull off. When we have some of this clarity, we fly back down to 10,000 feet, get a clean piece of paper and get to work.

> **Plan a Year Out:**

We all have different ways in which we do this work. The way it happens is not important; what is important is, we actually do the hard work of mapping out our year ahead of time. No matter what your church's expectations are of you and your calendar, it is important you are clear about what kind of ministry you want to do - and then plan to do it.

Sidebar: If you have not gotten into the rhythm of planning your ministry calendar out a year in advance, you are diluting the effectiveness and potential impact of your ministry.

By planning a year ahead of time you have the ability to craft a story, paint a picture, walk down a specific road. Choose the illustration you like best. The point is, a full-year calendar allows you to choose events for specific reasons in order to accomplish specific purposes. You're now in the driver's seat. You can space out events appropriately; have them build on themselves and on your curriculum; and make sense within the overall direction in which you're leading the ministry.

The difficult part is choosing which events to do and when to do them. Before I say yes to any activity, it must pass three tests. It must be consistent with my model, my context, and my passion. If it makes it through these three tests, it has a shot at making my yearly calendar.

> Plan Events That Are Consistent With Your Model:

You have a ministry model or philosophy that works for you, and you are proud of. If you really believe in this model of ministry, it is important to have the events you plan be consistent with said model. When we simply talk about our model of ministry - yet continue doing the sacred cows - we dilute our message.

I've landed on [The Celtic Way of Evangelism](#) model of ministry. This means, the three main thrusts of my ministry are Belong, Believe, and Become. As I create a yearly calendar I want to make sure the events I choose fall closely within one of these three categories. Once I have chosen events for this model, I like to see how I can make each event build upon the last as we spiral downward and then outward. My team and I gather and create an inviting community; all the while, we communicate what we believe and attempt to live it out within our youth group and with them, out into our community.

> Plan Events That Are Consistent With Your Context:

Every context is unique and, therefore, must be taken into consideration as the calendar is put together. Being urban, rural, or suburban dramatically changes the types of events you can even choose to do. Add to the mix the socio-economic factors of your peeps and the options dwindle further. What about the church for which you and their values? Considering the trajectory of the church should impact the events you choose to do as well. Even more specific, you must consider the importance of athletics, scholastics, work, disposable income and time. All these factors create filters through which you must sift all the possible events in order to get to the ones that will be most effective with the unique group of students in your unique church, in your unique town.

This is why some events are so popular in some contexts and an anathema in others. I have had plenty of calendar years where I have not been as smart or purposeful. I can't even count the amount of events that have bombed or backfired: providing Halloween alternatives to families who don't need one; camping with kids who hate being dirty; an expensive road-trip with kids who had no disposable income; a mission trip during football season... the list goes on.

Instead of doing events you like best, you have to do some hard work. Think about who your people are and provide events that meet their needs.

It is like the book, *The Five Love Languages*. We naturally love others in our own language. But a good relationship considers how others receive love; and loves them that way. The same is true with our events. You do the ones that meet your specific students where they are

> **Plan Events That Are Consistent With Your Passion:**

You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You have been called by God to your particular context to do ministry. God did not call me to your ministry. He called you. You, with all your complexity, history, gifts, talents and passions are who He desires to minister in the lives of your specific students.

It doesn't matter what your particular slant is; whether it is worship, service, discipleship, the poor, and missions. There is no way you can focus on all of it. Instead of chipping away at the surface of a million different parts of the Christian life, focus mainly on the things about which you are already passionate. If you do events that others are passionate about - but are simply a duty for you - your kids are the ones who lose. Do what you love, and do it well. When you do what you are passionate about, your students will be inspired and follow.

The trick here is to also make space for students to find the things they are passionate about and empower them to live into them. Modeling this yourself gives you freedom to be all God created you to be; as well as freeing your students to be all God has made them to be.

Plus, you will enjoy your time so much more! Your events will bring you life and increase your passion for Jesus and for your students. Ministry should be fun and life giving. So make certain the events you choose do that for you; enjoyment and increased passion will trickle down to your students.

> **My Calendar of Purposeful Events:**

If you have never done this, go to Staples and buy a scholastic Year at a Glance wall calendar and a variety pack of stickies. Have each color represent a purpose for an event, Put all the events you want to do or already have scheduled on the appropriate colored sticky. Once you have done this, start placing them on your calendar. Very soon, you will be able to tell how balanced your ministry is. You'll begin to see holes in some

areas and over-saturation in others. As you wrestle with, pray through, and fiddle with these like crazy, soon you will have put together a yearly calendar of events that are purposeful and add momentum to your already great ministry model.

The events that have passed my tests of model, context, and passion are as follows:

- BELONG : Fall Kick Off (A huge party to welcome everyone back on our first night of youth group)
- BELONG : Disneyland Road Trip
- BECOME : Hamilton Elementary School Service Project
- BELONG : Turkey Dinner
- BELONG : Christmas Party
- BELIEVE : Winter Camp
- BELIEVE : Movie Night (Unpacking a popular movie through a Christian worldview)
- BECOME : Gift Of Love (Partnership with other local churches to bless our city)
- BECOME : Urban Mission Trip
- BELONG : Softball BBQ
- BELONG, BELIEVE, BECOME : Senior Sunday

As you can see, my ministry's events are "Belong" heavy. But since identity formation and lack of community are contextually relevant for my area and my students' developmental state, "Belonging" is a good place to land. You will also notice not many events focus on "Believe". This is because my ministry events are intended to be memory-makers, community-developers, and places to put faith into action. To accomplish this, "Becoming" and "Belonging" events work best. Since this is the case, I focus the curriculum during mid-week youth group and Sunday school; examining what we "Believe", so we can go out and "Become" all God has for us.

This is how my team and we come up with the calendar for this upcoming year. What is your process? What are your sacred cows? What events do you do and why? Would you be willing to share your secret event?

> **Appendix : Sacred Cows**

When we show up in a new context, there are certain events that carry significant weight and history with a particular group. There are events we bring with us that carry significant weight and history with us as well. We call these events “sacred cows.” We normally only consider events we want to kill but will cost us too many political sacred cows. Rarely do we recognize our own cows that might need to be killed.

We must be aware that we have just as many - if not more - sacred cows as the churches we serve. We must be very careful which ones we kill and when we kill them. The more time we spend intentionally developing a ministry plan and making sure our events are purposeful and fit within it, the clearer it will become to us, our team, our parents and our students, why we’ve chosen these specific activities, and have said good bye to others.

> **Your Youth Group Says It All:**

For as solid as your ministry model and philosophy are, and for all the amazing events you have put on your calendar to wow kids and impress parents, what actually happens at youth group matters most. What happens during the hour and a half of youth group says everything about you and your ministry plan. It communicates to your staff, your parents, and your students what your ministry is all about. The liturgy of the evening; the way it is led; who’s up front or if there even is an up front; where people sit if they sit at all; what you sing; and what you teach, no matter how you teach it - all communicate your ministry plan. Pause for a minute and think about what your youth group time says about your ministry model or philosophy.

In my 15 years of running youth groups I’ve tried just about everything. There have been seasons where I have:

- Met in my living room with my entire youth group of five for dinner and Bible Study.
- Played guitar and led worship, have had students lead worship, and have had no singing worship at all.
- Bribed kids to come and bring friends by offering big prizes. (I still do this one)

- Set up and played huge all campus games and relays.
- Duct-taped kids to walls.
- Lit hundreds of candles for a quiet and reflective prayer experience (and fire hazard).
- Scrapped all my plans and packed kids up in cars for ice cream and for impromptu service opportunities.
- Used bullhorns to command attention on big game nights.
- Sent kids home for being rude and obnoxious.
- Wondered what I was going to teach on 20 min before kids have shown up.

> **Why Do We Do What We Do?**

For most of my ministry career, I've found myself going from the latest idea or fad to the next for a variety of reasons. Sometimes I stole ideas online because I was tired of having a youth group of five people and was willing to try anything get more kids to come. Other times, I stole ideas online because I was at the end of my rope with how selfish and self-absorbed my kids were and wanted to give them an experience to shake them up a bit. And there have been seasons where I have stolen ideas online because I was simply bored with youth group and wanted to mix things up.

It is an interesting exercise to reflect on why we do what we do on a particular youth group night. Most of what I've done was predetermined for me. The people before me did it a certain way and everyone seemed to like that model just fine. So why rock the boat? For what wasn't already laid out by my predecessor, I simply reflected back to what worked for me when I was in youth group. Somehow between those two poles, I found a rhythm to my youth group nights that worked.

> **A Disciplined Approach To Youth Group:**

But what if what you and I do on a youth group night was not decided by our predecessor, our past histories, the latest fad, or by the hot thing online? What would happen if what we choose to do during our youth group nights is born out of an intentional ministry plan based on a solid model or philosophy?

This is the hard work I did several years ago and I was surprised by where I landed. Before I share with you where I ended up, there are a couple of disclaimers. First, each one of us is unique and made with different ideas, personalities and passions. Second, on top of this reality, we are all called to totally different and unique contexts. Because of this, what works for me may not work for you. Nevertheless, I thought I would simply share my journey with the hopes of: A) making you feel better about your ministry and; B) more important, encouraging you to wrestle through this process yourself.

As I've shared with you in the other two sections, I have landed on a model of ministry built upon The Celtic Way of Evangelism. The basic gist of this book is, when doing ministry in a post-Christian context, it is impossible and counter-productive to build a movement by having people first conform to a belief; then live lives integrative with that belief, allowing them to fully belong to a community. Rather, from the very beginning, we allow people to belong to our community no matter who they are or what they believe or how they live. As members of our community, we explore together what it means to believe, and to work it out as they become all Christ has for them to be.

This paradigm of Belong, Belief, and Become shapes the how, what and why of youth group. The funny thing is, most of what we do looks exactly like most other youth groups (Solomon was right in that there is nothing new under the sun). But even though the parts may be similar, they all play into and build momentum toward our overall goal of helping students in our post-Christian context become all that Christ intends for them to be.

> Is that the Celtic Way of Youth Group or A Flashback to 1990?

With all the high minded, philosophical discussion surrounding what we do at youth group, when it comes to actually putting together our midweek gathering, it is easy to mistake our deep and relevant ministry for one that has gone backward as we rock out to Audio A!

Because our first order of business is to create community and a sense of belonging, everything we do is done to collect students, get them to interact, break down barriers, build memories, and share lives. I wish there were better ways to accomplish this. But what I have found to work is what has

worked for over 30 years in youth ministries all over the country. We have FUN!

As cool and sophisticated as students may come off, they are still kids. We can't let their false persona cause us to question ourselves or our ministry. Our cool kids need to remember that they are kids, there is fun to be had, friendships to be made, and even things to be learned. When we give them the social power to control a room, we shrink our ministries and cater to their natural self-absorption; giving them zero tools to learn to connect with people different than themselves.

When you bust out the big, messy, competitive games, you allow students to be true to their developmental phase. They have to be adults all the rest of the time. At youth group they get to be kids again. Games break down barriers and get kids to interact. The more kids interact, the more opportunities they have to realize there are other kids at youth group with whom they can connect. Games break the awkwardness at the beginning, and make a defined place and roll for kids to live into. As fun as these games are, their purpose is to foster a sense of belonging. At no time in the hour or two I have them do I want kids to feel isolated or invisible. No matter who they are, when they come to youth group, they are family. They belong!

We do more big games than any other youth worker I know. But the unique way God made me is, I love to have fun. So, fun is what we are going to do.

> Choosing Curriculum That Jives With Your Plan:

Besides having fun, we also squeeze in funny videos, announcements, and a time to welcome new people. After the fun and mayhem portion of youth group is over we transition - rather awkwardly sometimes - into a time of worship. Or students lead it and do a great job. I have gone back and forth on whether or not to have singing worship be a part of our youth group rhythm. In this season, I have students and leaders who are passionate about it and who do a fantastic job leading it. This helps tell our unique youth group story. We all belong, we all use our gifts as we become all that God has us to be. Worship for us is a time when we reflect on who God is and what we believe as we make space for Him to shape us into who we are becoming.

After singing worship we have a lesson, talk, sermon - whatever you call someone teaching for 20 minutes - from a passage of scripture. For 20 minutes, once a week, we work through a curriculum that helps us work out our ministry plan. The chosen curriculum is not haphazard or dictated by what I happen to be learning this week. It has been carefully and prayerfully put together a year in advance. This work has been done because, for as seriously as we take the Belong part of youth group, we take the Believe part even more seriously.

We only have limited time with our students. So, what we communicate with them is of utmost importance. The lessons themselves tell the story of how we belong, what we believe, and who we are to become. It is an annual rhythm that works hand in hand with the scholastic calendar and our calendar of events. Every summer I re-examine the curriculum choice of the last year and build on it to develop a curriculum plan for the upcoming year.

You might think planning out youth group talks a year in advance hinders the work of the Holy Spirit. But I have found the opposite to be true. The amount of spiritual work that goes into a yearly calendar is difficult and challenging. And once it is done, there is huge freedom in it. Plus, have you noticed that every school and institution has a prescribed curriculum? Maybe there is something to learn from them.

Because we all know listening to lecture-style sermons doesn't do a very good job of helping information stick long enough to transform, we use these sermons as launching pads for our small groups. In our ministry we have age and gender-specific small groups who meet every youth group to process the information, wrestle with the concepts, and attempt to put them into practice.

By the end of a youth group night, our dream is that every student feels like they belong and are part of our family, are introduced to a biblical truth or belief, and are encouraged to wrestle with it as they become all God has for them.

Like I said before, this is just how we have chosen to work it out in our unique context with our unique mix of students and staff. What do you do in your context? How is your youth ministry run? What do you do for curriculum?

> **Appendix: Our Curriculum For the Year**

It probably isn't helpful for you at all, but it is a discipline of mine to get it out there. These lessons work with our ministry plan and are designed to communicate why we belong, what we believe, and who we are to become. Here is what we are teaching for the next year during our midweek youth group. These are just the lesson titles. If you would like more detail, just let me know. If you have better ideas, please help me out and hook me up!

Sept 7: Open House

Sept 14 : I have huge value

Sept 21 : I have huge brokenness

Sept 28 : There is a huge solution

Oct 5 : A huge invitation

Oct 12 : A new world view

Oct 19 : Eat the Word

Oct 26 : Phil 1

Nov 2 : Phil 2

Nov 9: Phil 3

Nov 16 : Phil 4

Nov 30 : Operation Andrew (invite a friend night) Best Gift Ever!

Dec 7: Christmas Party

Jan 4 : Having integrity

Jan 11 : Peer pressure

Jan 18 : Following through

Jan 25 : Lying / Cheating

Feb 1 : Drugs (Pot)

Feb 8 : Dating

Feb 15 : Sex

Feb 29 : How to engage culture

Mar 7 : Music

Mar 14 : Internet

Mar 21 : Movies

Mar 28 : Hot Topic Night

April 4 : Worship Night
April 20 : What is the Good News
April 25 : Good news for you
May 2 : Good news for the world
May 9 : How to share Good News
May 16 : Outreach Night
May 23 : Softball Party
May 30 : Small Group Dinner

The End!

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Three Components to an effective leader's meeting

Every week before youth group we have a half hour leaders' meeting for our volunteer youth staff. This is, by far, the most important meeting of my week. It is an opportunity for our entire staff to touch base before we jump into another night of student ministry. Over the years these meetings have taken on many different looks. But as I continue to reflect on how to make that time a win for everyone, I have landed on my three most important components to an effective leader's meeting.

1. The Check In: Full time student ministry is my job. It is the thing that I spend a majority of my time thinking about, praying about, and trying to improve upon. This is not true for my volunteers. They have real jobs that take 40-60 hours of their lives. That job is the thing that takes up most of the free space in their brains. They come to youth group after a long and hectic day at work, at home with their own kids, or from class. When they walk through the door, they are often frazzled and rushed.

Checking in allows us to actually care for each other. The volunteers are not filler to this ministry. They are this ministry. As the leader of this team it is important we see them as people with real lives, concerns, joys and sorrows. Allowing space for people to share their outside lives together unites the group, builds emotional strands towards each other, and actually deepens our sense of team.

2. Head's Up: This is the meat of the meeting. It is the time to discuss what is going on in student ministries. Every week this time has a little different focus. Often, it is giving the leaders a heads up to what is in store for the evening. What the games are, where I need their help, where we are going with the message, and ways to maximize their times in small group. This allows the staff to go into the evening knowing what you know and expecting what you expect.

Periodically, this time is also used to make slight adjustments. Nothing is ever stagnant in student ministry. Often, I notice a change in our group dynamic or a leader brings something to my attention - something that has

not been working. Sometimes, my leaders or myself will slip into a funk with their small groups. We need to give room for conversation, equipping and encouragement. By making space for honest critique and feedback, we model that we truly are a team doing ministry together.

3. Pray Expectantly: It is easy to let the weekly grind of student ministry bring us down. Students are fickle. If we are not careful, it is easy to put them in a box. Especially after being in a church for a few years, it becomes second nature to peg students as the hard ones, the shallow ones, the busy ones, the dramatic ones, the hypocritical ones, and the lost causes. But this is a lie from the pit of Hell. God makes it very clear that He always leaves the 99 and runs after the one. God is the author and perfecter of their faith; and has been and will continue to be at work in their lives.

It is vital that we end our time together as a staff leaning into the heavenly realities about our students. To ask that our eyes would be His eyes and our hearts would be His heart. That we would be the people who stand in the gap for these students and will gladly love them into the kingdom of God. We intentionally wipe the slate clean every week and give all the space in the world for students to be exactly who they are this particular week. And as they are fickle, we remind ourselves that we are the adults and will not be fickle. We will pray expectantly, counting on the fact that God will use our feeble efforts to draw these students to ourselves.

Amen and Amen!

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Who do you recruit for volunteers

> **This Isn't How it is Supposed To Be:**

One of the worst feelings I've ever had in youth ministry is the feeling of going at it alone, feeling like I was the only one who cared for students at my church. Most of this feeling came because I really was the only adult from our church at youth group helping connect and pull off our program.

It doesn't take many nights like that - or trips where you find yourself scrambling at the last possible minute to find an adult to drive for you - that you are willing to do whatever it takes to recruit volunteers. At this point in the ministry it doesn't even matter if they like kids -just give me a warm body!

> **Getting Volunteers Now:**

Ok, if you are in a situation like the one I described above, you actually do simply need to just get a warm body in the room. I know it doesn't sound like much, but you cannot do this alone. First, for spiritual and emotional reasons, but also for legal reasons as well. If you are holding out for some adult who will attract kids, appropriately interact with them, and help nurture a healthy version of Christianity, you will die holding your breath.

A simple, if not very sexy solution is to get parents there. Have them drive, host events, help set up, clean up, facilitate small groups, whatever. They are adults. They care about the program because their kids are there. And you can grab them right now. Even if it is a different team for every youth group or trip, just get them.

> **The Best Long Term Plan:**

I don't want to reinvent the wheel when it comes to volunteer recruitment. The best article out there on the subject is from Jonathan McKee, and can be found at <http://www.thesource4ym.com/trainingtools/article.aspx?id=11>.

You should really check out his full website at <http://www.thesource4ym.com/>.

I find it incredibly helpful.

> **Recruit Your Friends:**

There is only one question this article raises for me: Who are the people you run after or invite on these 'dates'? (as McKee calls them). Instead of banging your head against the door seeking out those perfect people who love students and will cause your ministry to soar, try something a little more intuitive. Ask your friends.

The life of a youth worker is lonely and busy. It is almost impossible for us to maintain normal friendships because our schedules are so messed up. Because of this we have a difficult time creating and maintaining friendships. So, I decided my youth ministry volunteer team would be made up of people who I love and want to be around, who are my friends, or who I want to be my friends.

Everything else McKee shares is right on and should be put into practice. We still need to woo our potential volunteers. But when you actually like the people you're asking or really do want to get to know them and become friends with them, it's that much easier. And chances are the people with whom you choose to surround yourself, and build friendships, will also share your amazing relational abilities combined for a deep love for the Lord.

Think: Who are your friends? Who do you want to get to know better? Invite them to spend time with you on your turf, volunteering in your youth ministry!

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How to give a brilliant youth talk

I remember the experience like it was yesterday. I was back at the speaker cabin sitting in my chair wondering what in the world had just happened. My heart was beating out of my chest and my mind was racing; trying to figure out where I lost them, what went wrong, what happened. Before I even had a chance to figure it out, before my heart rate could even slow, I heard a knock at the door.

I was about to throw up. To my horror, the director of the camp was at my door. I knew he would come. I just didn't expect it to be so fast. I invited him in, and he sat down on my bed across from me.

"Everything ok?" He asked. "That was a little rough."

Before I could even respond, he filled me in on his plan B. I was welcomed to stay in the cabin and enjoy the rest of my time at camp, but he was going to finish off the talks.

I couldn't believe it!! Actually, the worst part is, I could believe it!! What in the world happened? I am a youth ministry veteran, a compelling speaker, and a likeable person. I had just wasted 45 minutes of the opening night talk sharing the historical background and complexities of Ephesians as I set the stage for a weekend study of the book filled with four exegetically amazing outlines of the book. While my preaching professor would be proud, the room packed with high school-ers was completely lost. From the moment I looked up from my notes, half way through my talk, I realized I had lost my audience. And as I finished my sermon, my mind scrambled with what to do. My mouth was unpacking Paul, but my mind was arguing with my professor, with these students, and with my own calling.

Thankfully, the camp director was a good friend and was extra gracious with me. In our discussion together, I had figured out my problem and my solution. I told him I would scrap my sermons and put together a great series of talks for him. And that is exactly what I did.

Tell your seminary prof to relax 😊

That culminating experience officially helped me pull my gigantic, over-inflated, seminary-trained head out of my butt and settle into my calling as a pastor to students. Up until this point I had increasingly attempted to gain

favor with my senior pastor, parents, and fellow students - to prove to them youth pastors are real pastors, and we shouldn't dumb down the scriptures. In my attempt to satisfy all these people and prove my worth, I had made the scriptures completely irrelevant.

In no way am I saying a youth talk should be dumbed down or exegesis is unimportant. I am saying we must keep our audience in mind as we are prophets for our people - as we unpack the scriptures for our students. We must remember our students need clear, memorable, applicable teaching. Even more than the teaching, they need space to unpack what they have just heard.

When I first started in youth ministry, some youth ministry veteran passed on their outline to me. It is simple, straightforward, and even rhymes. I used it religiously as my structures for youth ministry. Seminary was a short and awful hiatus from this structure. And ever since my sermon at camp, it has been my go-to outline. (Thank you Larry Richards, the CE expert from the 70's, thank you for single-handily saving my youth ministry career.)

> Here is the most amazing structure ever used for talks to students: Hook, Book, Look, Took!

Hook: This is the classic funny or compelling story used to gain the group's attention while addressing the topic at hand.

Book: This is the passage of scripture on which you will be teaching.

Look: This is where you teach through your three points from the passage of scripture. The simplest plan is to communicate a point and illustrate it with a story or example. These three points can be an acronym, alliteration; whatever clever tool you want. It is the meat of the lesson.

Took: This is where you provide a take-away from the lesson for your students. We want scripture to mold and shape us; the "took" is where we give them some examples of practical application.

Small Group Questions: We end every lesson with our students breaking up into small groups to unpack the lesson and figure out how to apply it in real life.

I know this isn't rocket science, but maybe you have been struggling with the format for your talks. Maybe you have drifted into complexity. Or,

maybe you are brand new and have no idea where to start. If that is you, I hope this simple format helps.

*This is simply the outline an average youth pastor uses. If you are a brilliant communicator, please share your structure and your tricks with us!
Keep preaching it!*

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The Five Key ingredients for Student Ministry

> I NEED HELP IN MY YOUTH MINISTRY!

I am continually surprised by how many of my colleagues find themselves in this boat. Every now and then a brand new face shows up to our local youth worker cluster. The person usually is a pretty warm and happy person, it is obvious they love students and they love Jesus! And this is evident because a church saw the same thing in them and put them in charge of the student ministry. Most of these wide-eyed, rookies are part time and long to be faithful servants.

Then, almost without fail, two months will go by and they show up at our local network gathering disillusioned, rudderless, and overwhelmed. If this is you, or you know someone in your network whose story sounds familiar, have no fear!

> Youth ministry is actually the best and easiest job on the planet!

The passion and excitement you first had to love kids and help them love Jesus is still the name of the game. There is just some vital infrastructure vital to your success and, for some reason, no one ever tells you about it. So, you end up spinning your wheels with little success or joy and plenty of unhappy people giving you advice. That said, let me share with you the five basic pillars for a sound infrastructure so you can put those in place, work the system, and get back to the thing you were called to do! LOVE KIDS AND HELP THEM LOVE JESUS!

1) Everything is built on a solid and simple programmatic structure. Your program is the skeleton. Without a good one, your entire ministry is in jeopardy. Just like humans, every skeleton is unique. But for the most part contain the same components. As you develop your skeleton, don't try and reinvent the wheel. There is a reason youth ministries for the past 30 years have had fun games, mixers, worship, teaching and small groups. Within every context, the flavor of this program will vary. But most healthy ministries have all five ingredients. Whether your main program is Sunday morning, Wednesday night or whenever; lay out your hour and a half, divide your time into five parts and begin to fill in the blanks. Before you know it, you have successfully created a youth ministry that builds community, grows faith, and creates space for ownership.

2) Make memories; the importance of a calendar. Whether you know it or not, you have a youth ministry calendar. There are events, sacred cows that mark your year. All you really need to do is be intentional about when and where they fit in your calendar. Special events are vital for creating shared memories. And for teenagers, these shared memories are the foundation for deep community. Again, simply think about what your church already does and values; then space them out and add some of your own flavor. If you attempt an event every month or every other month you are looking at 6-12 memory-making, faith-developing events. The easily implemented ones every youth ministry has tried are as follows: Winter Camp; Summer Camp; Mission Trip; Lock-In; Service Days; Urban Mission Trip; Bowling; Movie Night; Roller Skating; Sledding; Skiing; Backpacking / Camping; Water Ski on the lake; BBQ; Softball; etc. Simply take your church's sacred cows, add your own passions, and you are there! Don't feel bad for copying what other youth ministries do. How do you think we all got our ideas?

3) Contact work. This is the bread and butter of student ministry. Back in the 70's and 80's Young Life brought this type of relationship building to the youth ministry world, and the world of youth ministry has never been the same.

What is contact work, you ask? Great question. It is simply showing up where students are. Spend part of your week out of your office and your world. Show up in theirs. Bring love, grace and food to your students, and to their friends. When you consider your allotted hours, my opinion is, you should spend half of them with students. This means baseball and football games, band concerts, ice cream and coffee with groups of students, hiking and video games, etc.

4) Use a solid curriculum. For some reason, there are those who think using curriculum is cheating - or worse - un-spiritual. The truth is, you do not have enough time in your week to do all the things required to build a brand new youth ministry, and develop a theologically deep and appropriate lesson with true scope and sequence week after week. Most youth workers who don't use curriculum simply rely on their dozen favorite verses or the particular thing God is teaching them that week. This is great for your spiritual development, but misses it for the unique spiritual development of students. There are two great curriculum options out there:

- [Orange's XP3:](#) Orange is a complete curriculum system from beginning to end. They have a well thought out and developed cycle and scope to their curriculum. It is brilliant. Their team is top notch and their system gives you every thing you need to kill it during your lesson. In addition, they give you small group questions and form letters to send to parents. The only hang up is, it is a bit pricy. But if you have budget for it, DO IT!
- [Youth Ministry 360's Elements:](#) Like XP3, they give you great lessons, small group questions, media, and form letters to parents. A unique part of the Elements curriculum is, they also provide a weekly devotional for students reinforcing what you just taught. Also, the price is just right! You can buy one three week lesson and try it out, or buy their entire 25 lesson set and be dialed in for almost two years. Look at your budget and their products; then pull the trigger!

5) Communicate to parents and your supervisor. If you want to have this job for more than six months, then there is really only one thing you must do: COMMUNICATE CLEARLY! You can be killing it in your youth programs, or even sucking it up and, actually, it doesn't really matter. What matters is how your parents and supervisor perceive you are doing. If they think you are doing well, they will talk you up. It will be a win for you and your students. If they are questioning you, they will unintentionally share their angst with their circle of friends. The best hour you can ever spend in your job is emailing your parents and cc'ing your supervisor. What should you include in these weekly emails? Great question. If you buy XP3 or Elements, they actually write these emails for you! But if you still want to write them yourselves, just follow this simple outline:

Welcome, Greeting, Hi

Something you are excited about in your student ministry right now.

Share what their kids can expect at the upcoming program. (What you will be teaching, how they can follow up, practical take-homes regarding your lesson).

Communicate upcoming dates. You most likely have (or should have) an event in the next month. Clarify the details, costs, and RSVP policy. Even communicate some upcoming dates that will take some actual

preparation and higher costs so parents can prepare. These would include camps, mission trips, etc.

How they can contact you for any questions or concerns

Ask for prayer requests for their kids and them.

Thank them for the overwhelming privilege it is to meet with their kids, to love them and help them love Jesus.

Sincerely . . .

NOW: Soak up the good will of those concerned adults, and the new friendships with your students as you help them love Jesus!

That's it. It isn't rocket science, but there is some science to it. Don't over-spiritualize or patronize this formula. I have been doing student ministry for 15 plus years. Every healthy youth ministry has these basic ingredients. The cool ones just have fancy names and graphics for each part. The learning curve for this job is awful. But it is also short. Do these five things and you have cut your curve in half. Remember, the sooner you get this structure in place, the sooner you can spend your emotional, physical, and spiritual energy doing the actual ministry you were called to do; not spinning your wheels trying to understand it.

Good luck on your journey.

Blessings!

bk

PS: For the past eight years or so I have had the privilege of being a youth ministry coach; and find endless joy in walking through ministry with fellow youth workers. If you would like to talk in person, on the phone, Skype, whatever, please feel free to contact me anytime!
benjaminkerns@gmail.com

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Manners: A vital part of our student ministry curriculum

One of the most important aspects to a balanced and thriving student ministry is having an intentional scope and sequence to your curriculum.

We must be intentional with what we teach, and use the limited amount of time we have with our students well. While many of you are thoughtful about your teaching, are biblically deep, contextually astute, and clever as all get out, there might be one significant area that gets left out.

I am sure you would agree, our culture is getting more and more coarse.

Students are increasingly self-absorbed and rude. Maybe the truth is, you don't even realize it anymore or have simply died to it. Maybe you think you will lose street cred if you push back against their entitlement mentality. Or maybe you are satisfied with at least getting them to say grace when you are all together for a meal.

As students become more and more isolated, they have fewer and fewer places in their lives where they actually have to consider others. Their music, movie and their choices are all individualized. Whatever (and whenever) they want, is their instinct and highest value. If at any time a student is done paying attention in a group, they can simply plug in their ear buds, check Facebook, and check out.

> Why manners are important:

Forever, manners have been the social contract used to teach people how to interact in society. Manners are the habits that remind us the world doesn't revolve around us. "Please" and "thank you" are the words we use to realize that when we take things or use things they were first someone else's to begin with. Ladies first, holding the door for others, or allowing those older than you to sleep on the couch when on a youth group road trip are ways to graciously put others needs above our own; to remember that our needs and desires are not the utmost of importance. Eye contact and follow up questions affirm and validate others and remind us our view is not the one and only.

Seemingly, everyone else has allowed manners to slide. Our culture validates and lifts up the core value of "getting yours." But this should not be the case. Manners are of utmost importance and, actually, part of our

spiritual formation. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interest of others.”

We love the concept of loving others. We focus on loving the poor for a weekend urban mission trip, or loving others by - well actually, we don't have any other examples. One main way we put loving and considering others into practice above ourselves is by implementing old school manners. And if we don't teach them, no one will.

Here are some of the manners we are trying instilling in our students:

- No ear buds! (at church, youth group, trips, cars, ever!)
- Ladies first at meals.
- Being respectful of others' perspectives and ideas.
- Asking specific follow up questions.
- Everyone participating in everything whether they like it or not.
- Sharing food, gum, mints, or whatever is opened in mixed company.
- Inviting others into activities and social gatherings (or not talking about them when in mixed company)
- Saying “please” and “thank you” to adult leaders and hosts for activities.
- Eye contact and nodding heads when others are talking.
- No cell phones during worship, lesson, and small groups.
- Sharing responsibility for cooking and cleaning on trips.
- Carrying each others' luggage when packing and unpacking for trips.

For whatever coolness you think you might lose by constantly nagging your students to be respectful, engage, share, and be kind, will pay dividends as the entire culture of your student ministry actually begins to reflect the second commandment of Jesus.

Manners are the most simple and applicable way for students to apply what they are learning in the real world. As you intentionally plan out your curriculum, calendar your events, and plan your activities, don't forget about the never-ending teachable moments of instilling manners into your

students. It might be the single most applicable take away they may have from your ministry.

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The search for El Dorado; the elusive quest for a raise

So, you want a raise. Who doesn't? Getting a raise as a vocational youth worker is one of the most difficult, and therefore rarest item to ever make a church budget. Just like the quest for El Dorado, this journey often leads to a disappointing conclusion. Before you sacrifice your family finances and your soft heart for the church by being a good soldier, working for Jesus and not money, consider the perilous world of church finances.

By better understanding what you were hired into, it will help you make the appropriate and healthy choices at your current church; and when negotiating compensation packages at future churches. So, if you think it is about time you deserve a raise and are not sure where to go next, consider looking at your position from the outside perspective. This perspective should inform the some of the decisions you will need to make as your student ministry career progresses. And finally, this reality should allow us to guard our heart toward our current church and its leadership. That being said, lets jump right into it:

> YOUR POSITION THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUR BOARD:

You were hired to fill a position, not as an investment in your life long personal development. As the employee, this sounds harsh. But unfortunately, you must understand it is exactly what you are. You were hired on a certain salary scale for a particular position. This has no value judgments, just a helpful understanding.

The salary you were offered was the point on the salary scale which is the lowest point you would be willing to go (often way too low due to some spiritual head trip). In most churches, salary negotiations are simply getting the most bang for their buck. Churches want to hire someone for the lowest cost possible. This isn't jerky or slimy. It is simply how salary negotiations work; which means when we negotiate, we have to negotiate, and not let the "call" trump all other data as we use our discernment.

The church has no extra money. Most churches spend exactly what they take in. Most churches don't have an intentional financial plan. The

churches that do, rarely have giving the youth pastor a raise as anywhere in the top ten list of financial priorities. The lead pastor needs a raise; the other associate pastor does too; the floors need to be cleaned; there has to be paint; carpet; a new copier; and then consider the ministry programs' budget. All of these need money before you do.

If you do propose a raise and actually get one, it will take at least 18 months from start to finish. Church budgets are tricky and take a long time. The current budget was decided six months before the budget gets implemented. A new interim needs to be considered one year before that. Usually the youth pastor won't even consider suggesting / fighting for a raise until they are in immediate financial need. Combine the immediate need with the 18 month lead time and you can see how this quest rarely turns out well.

> HOW THIS INFORMS YOUR FUTURE DECISIONS REGARDING YOUR CAREER:

I get that you are called by Jesus to love kids and help them come to love Jesus. I get that this isn't a career, but a high calling. And while this is true, it doesn't have to be mutually exclusive to taking the negotiating process and your family's financial situation seriously.

Your calling is, most likely, not to a specific church for the rest of your life. Your calling is as a student ministry pastor. So the team you play for isn't what determines your call. And if the church where you are work isn't paying you well, there is nothing wrong with shopping around and looking for a context that will.

> THIS IS NOT A SPIRITUAL ISSUE, IT IS JUST HOW IT IS

From the church's perspective you are a commodity. There was a youth pastor there before you and there will be one after you. You are faithfully running your leg of the baton relay. It is not all about you. In fact, because it isn't about you at all, you are now free to make choices for your family and career as you move forward which will allow you to live into the full calling that Jesus has put on your life.

For as glorious and mysterious as the church is, when it comes to budgets, it is a simple nonprofit organization forever in budgetary crisis. The financial

situation to which you agreed when you were hired will most likely be the financial situation you will have until you move on. The church is not evil or jacking you. They are doing the best with what they have and hoping you will stick around for a while. The freedom comes when you understand you are simply a section runner in the big relay race of student ministry in this church. Don't make it more or less than what it is.

> IF YOU STILL WANT TO FIGHT FOR A RAISE, THEN:

- 1) Run your area of ministry with excellence.
- 2) Be a value added: Do or offer to do more than your job description in exchange for higher salary.
- 3) Plan ahead: from time of consideration to implementation is 18 months.
- 4) Do right by your family: Don't let your family finances ruin your spouse's or your heart for the church. If you are financially going down, then ask for the raise you think you deserve, and look for a job that will pay you what you think you are worth.

Good luck fellow travelers on the road to El Dorado!

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How much time do you spend in the office?

I bet the answer is, too much. The longer they stay in ministry, there is this really strange tendency for youth workers to fall in love with their offices or cubicles. It is time to remember that youth ministry is a fine balance between office work and contact work. A heavy emphasis on one or the other can seriously hinder our ministry, reputation, and even our longevity. Here is one way to evaluate your time management.

> Start with 45 hours:

I know there are a ton of different expectations out there for youth workers and a ton of different definitions of what counts as work. Add to the mix retreats, mission trips, lock-ins, etc., and the amount of hours a week becomes a total circus. But with all the variables, a good benchmark is 45 hours.

It may be common to have some weeks pop up that greatly exceed this number; and a week here and there where you might come in closer to 30. But for your day in, day out planning, 45 is the place to start. Any more than this and you are a for-sure work-a-holic with balance issues. Less than this and you are a slacker.

Now that we have the amount of hours on the table, what do we do with them?

> How many hours are in program?

Every youth worker has different programmatic responsibilities. For me, I have middle school group on Tuesday nights from 7:00-8:30. I show up an hour before and never leave before 9. Three hours I have high school group on Wednesday nights from 7:00-9:00. I show up an hour before and never leave before 9:30. Three and a half hours. I have church and Sunday school on Sunday mornings. I show up at 8 and don't leave until close to One and a half hours. This means that I have 12 hours a week in program (good math everyone). The remaining 33 hours of time is divided in half between office work and contact work.

> 16 Hours of Office Work:

Office work, administration, is key on several levels. First and foremost, it actually reminds your colleagues in the office that you work there. They are hard at work and expect you to be as well. By you being in the office, you show them you are a team player and carry your weight. The last thing you want is for your co-workers to start to second-guess your work ethic. Once they lose trust in you, it is all downhill. But more than just covering your own butt, on a spiritual level it is because we practice the ministry of presence. By simply being there, we get to be a part of the daily work of God as we are in relationship with our co-workers.

The second reason you are in the office is to complete your administrative tasks. We are responsible for our programs, teaching, training, event planning, receipts, and so on. And the truth is, this shouldn't take more than half your hours. You were hired to pull off some amazing programs. But if you can't pull them off in half your hours, then you are trying too hard or not being efficient enough. I know you have great ideas and want to find the perfect graphic for a flyer or something. But let's face it. It doesn't take that long to plan out a youth group or Sunday school. We need to be efficient in our tasks in order to pull off a great program, yet allows us for time to do the actual thing we are paid to do; build relationships with students.

> 16 Hours of Contact Work:

At the end of the day, no one really cares about your program or the t-shirts you designed. What matters are the relationships you build with your students and leaders. How do you build these relationships? Good old-fashioned contact work.

Go where the students are. Show up on campus; take a bunch of them out to pizza; go to a football game or dance recital; go where they are. Invite them into your life and into your home. Open up the church gym or set up video games using the multi-media devices of the sanctuary. Teach a couple of them how to play guitar. This is probably your heart. So just do it.

Also, it is equally important to do contact work with your leaders. Spend time out of your week loving on them, showing up at their work, having the church buy them lunch or dinner. Your leaders are the lifeblood of your ministry and need to be cared for and treated well.

Think of how many people you can connect with in 16 hours a week. Think of all the relational sticky you can develop between your people and you

over the course of month, a year, five years. Soon, no one will care at all about the t-shirt that took you 30 hours to design and order - and that no one will wear - but they will know they are seen and loved by you. The only way this can happen is by actually working hard while you are in the office so you can spend half your time being with people.

> **This is My Plan:**

I am in the office by 8:00 Monday; and spend all day at my desk. I make a list of all that has to happen during the week ahead; all the programs I need to pull off; the lessons I need to teach; and the upcoming events for which I need to plan. Then, it is off to the races. You would be surprised at how much you can get done when you actually sit down and just do it. My goal is, by our staff meeting on Tuesday at 10:00, all my administrative tasks are done, and all my programs are outlined ready to go. Then after staff meeting is when I write out my lessons. By Tuesday afternoon everything is really done.

When I go into the office on Wednesday morning, all I have to do is shmooze it up with my staff. I goof off with them, buy them coffees, and occasionally I have some last minute planning and phone calls for an upcoming event. I don't ever need to come in on Wednesdays, but I do because of rule number one. The office is about reminding people I work there. Since I need to be there and all my work is done, I can move on to more relaxing and fun things like reading books, magazines, and blogs. I also use this flex time on Wednesday to dream and reflect. On non-spiritual days, I will simply Facebook-stalk everyone I know.

Wednesday afternoon and all day Thursday is dedicated to contact work with students, leaders, and more students.

This is what works for me. What works for you?

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Top 10 ways to win your lead pastor over to student ministry

The truth is, very few senior pastors are passionate about student ministry. If they were, they would be student ministry pastors. God has given them a heart and calling to shepherd the entire church; which student ministry is only a part. If you want them to become a big fan and advocate for student ministry, it begins with having them become big fan of you. Here are ten practical ways to build heart strands with your pastor and help them become a fan of you and student ministry.

10) They Are The Boss:

As a youth ministry professional, we have been told by we are living into a calling - a calling to ministry. We have a passion for students and ministry. We love dreaming up strategic plans and vision statements for our ministry. But the truth is, a youth ministry job is a job. You are a hired staff with a boss and expectations; and the pastor is your boss. It is ridiculous when youth workers - the bottom of the church staff totem pole - pay zero attention to the politics of this workplace and spend zero time and effort seeking to please their boss.

The church for which you work is under the leadership of the pastor. It is their church, vision and plan. Instead of fighting this and competing with your boss, live into their vision, mission and plan. When you are supportive of their dreams, their trust and respect for you will grow.

You were hired because your church values the care and discipleship of students as part of the overall plan of the church. Your job is to do that and do it well! You were not called to be an independent agent caring for the students of the world. You were hired to do student ministry within the context of the church in which you were hired - under the leadership and direction to do a specific job. Your specific job is spelled out in your job description.

The more you respect your boss and treat them like they are actually your boss, their respect and affection for you will grow. If they don't have to compete with or discipline you, they are free to advocate for you.

Do something specific to bless your boss today.

9) Don't Be A Liability:

Student ministry is a complicated job with many moving parts. Even the most veteran youth worker among us are bound to make mistakes and create messes that are in desperate need of cleaning up. Making messes is par for the course. But when we don't clean them up and those messes move up the chain of command, we are bound to be in some big trouble. If you want to make your pastor a big fan of you and student ministry, don't be a liability.

Understand The Two Unstated Goals:

As I have done this job for 15 years and worked for several pastors and supervisors, I have realized that outside of the job description, there are actually two unstated goals of supreme importance. It is too bad they are unstated. But they are real, and cannot be taken lightly.

- Your number one unstated goal is to make your pastor and the church in general look good. Who you are and the job you do is a direct reflection on your pastor and their ministry. When you do a good job, defer to your supervisor, speak well of the church, good will flows like waterfalls in spring. The second goal is simply the inverse.
- Your number two unstated goal is to make your pastor and the church not look bad. This may seem like the same as above, but it is not. Building good will takes time, effort, and consistency. Doing ministry well day in and day out builds your trust and credibility. But one dumb mistake, one black eye to your pastor or to the church and it is all over. Nobody likes to look bad, and I have found lead pastors to be at the top of this list. Almost every lead pastor I know lives with this low level fear that the youth worker they hired has the potential to torpedo them and the church. When we remove the worry of being a liability, we allow space for them to begin to trust, love us, and advocate for us.

So, how do you not be a liability? Here are two simple solutions.

- Clean up after yourself. You will make mistakes, break things, and upset people. That is the cold hard truth. But in order not to be a liability, you simply need to fix it. When you make a mistake, own it as quickly as possible, get ahead of it and put in the hard work to fix it. Do not let angry people get to your pastor and complain about the poor job you are doing. If there are grievances about you and your ministry out there, you should be working double time to win them over, solve the problem, and mend the broken bridge. It is on you - and you alone - to make it right. Everyone else in the church has the luxury to be pissed and talk trash. But you do not. If you expect others to stand up for and defend you, you will quickly be like the cheese and stand alone. If you don't want to be a liability, clean up your messes, own your garbage, and fix whatever the problem is.
- Don't let your pastor be surprised by your screw-ups. When you do screw up and can't fix it, you'd better be the first one in your pastor's office asking for help and maybe even forgiveness. The truth is, your pastor wants you to succeed. They want you to do well. And when they are taken by surprised it crushes them. Unhealthy pastors will throw you under the bus. Healthy ones will protect you but die inside to you a little bit. But when you bring it to them first, they have an opportunity to help, mentor, protect. Believe it or not, pastors became pastors because they love people and want to help them grow and mature. When you allow them to do that for you, they become that much more invested in you and your success.

Hiding messes always leaves mold, decay, and death. Bringing them to the light allows for freedom and growth. May we live into our unstated goals and do ministry in a way that elevates our leaders and the church, and not give them any reason to think of us as liabilities.

8) Professionalism is Key:

For as long as there has been youth ministry, there have been youth workers who are fully living into their glorified adolescence. Rather than embrace the decades of hard work by the youth workers who have gone before to elevate this calling to an actual calling respected by the church at large, many choose to live into the Peter Pan mythology that youth ministry is an isolated ministry and a unique calling that should be respected no matter

what. And when we are called on the carpet about being sloppy and a hack, we push back and think it is so sad these adults have lost their edge and don't care about the lost. But the truth is, professionalism is key when gaining respect amongst your pastor and your parents. If you want them to be an advocate for you and your ministry, you have to play ball.

You Pastor is a Professional:

Believe it or not, your pastor is a professional. Leading and shepherding this congregation is their call; and it is also their career. They have decades of experience, costly degrees, pensions, and have paid their dues. Pastors are the CEO's of the organization known as the church. Check out their office, it is really fancy with lots of important looking books. If you look closer you will see pictures and memorabilia from a career in ministry. They have worked hard to be a respected voice in the congregation, elder board and the community. And to do this in our context is to live into the role of professional.

You are expected to be a professional too:

The fact that you have a paid position doing youth ministry means people before you have convinced your congregation it is a worth while investment to pay for someone to care for the students of the church and the community. But you were not called to be a free agent in the community. You were hired to play ball in a particular context. Since your pastor is a professional and most people on your elder boards are professionals, the manner in which you interact with them should be professional as well. Here are a couple of tips to live into being a professional.

- **Play by their rules:** Every board and pastor has a set of expectations; some verbal and others not. You must find out what they are and meet them. If there is a dress code for church or the office, get some new clothes. If they want reports, write them. If they ask you to have measurable goals, figure out what that means then complete them.
- **You are a cross-cultural missionary:** Usually we only think of this as having to do with the students with whom we work. But the truth is, we must also be cross-culturally sensitive when we deal with those above us. Many adults at our church will be very impressed with the

ways we can relate to students. And they will be very unimpressed when you speak to them this way. How you talk at your traditional service is different than at youth group; or at least it should be. Impress your elders and pastor at how well you understand your context and live well in each one.

- **Get your head around the corporate direction the church is going:** Many young youth workers are hanging on to an Acts 2 version of the church with no hierarchy or power struggles, and only love and grace. But the truth is, every church everywhere in the world functions in ways that make sense to its particular culture. In our culture, the reigning model is the corporation. This is the language used, what forms their expectations on us, and how we are judged and evaluated. If you would like to continue to be employed by a church - and, especially, if you would like to be employed by another one in the future - you need to live into this reality.

- **Being professional doesn't take away from being spiritual:** Many people seem to think corporate and spirit are mutually exclusive. Corporate is simply the model in which ministry is done, creating the framework for our positions. It is the framework that determines whether we get raises or fired. In no way does it take away from our God-given calling and the task of ministry we are to do. It is just the rules of the yard. Instead of fighting for a first century Palestinian model of anything, we need to be aware that we live in a particular context and called to do ministry in it. For those employed by a church, this means playing by their rules. If you don't like that reality, then do true ministry by being a tentmaker and do whatever you would like 😊.

May God continue to be gracious with us youth workers as we strive to honor God, reach students, and play ball with the church, and somehow do it all in a way that honors Jesus.

7) Clean Your Office

It is a simple rule. If you want to be treated with respect, you must act in a way that deserves it. Believe it or not, your office very loudly communicates what kind of respect you deserve. Most of us think of our offices as a holding tank or storage closet; simply the place to get some details worked out so you can actually get out there and do ministry. Most of the people about whom we care most in ministry will never see our office. But the most important people for our longevity in our context see our office every day. If you want your pastor to be your advocate and an advocate for students, show you are a professional and aware of your context.

A Couple of No-No's: Don't get me wrong. The youth worker's office should be the most interesting office at the church. As the youth worker you do have a ton of latitude. Use that latitude to express yourself. Hang up your *Grey's Anatomy* calendar, Chuck Norris poster, and signed baseball. This is all great. The problem is when we take this latitude too far. Here are some basic No-No's for a youth worker's office.

NO PIZZA BOXES: I know it is cliché, but as recently as within this last year I visited a fellow youth worker and he had pizza boxes from Bible study the night before still piled up in his office. Food in general is a No-No. Basically, you have made your office into a glorified trashcan. In case you don't realize it, you have made your office - and maybe the entire office - smell like old food. No Bueno.

NO CLUTTER: It is so easy to have stacks of paper, supplies, books, magazines, pictures, and marshmallow guns scattered around your office. There is this strange sense of pride we have because it looks like we are busy. What we are really saying is, we are not organized and an eye sore. We have to find places to store these things and throw junk away. I confess I am the worst offender. Notice the comments from your fellow staff when you clean up your office and it looks hospitable.

NO BILLS: Nothing gives your supervisor a heart attack more than to walk into your office space and see your receipts, bills, and invoices scattered around your already messy office. Even if you have a crazy system for keeping track of your money and receipts, don't share it

with the world. Mishandling money is one of the fastest ways to get fired. Don't give your pastor any reason to raise an eyebrow at how you manage it.

This is Their House, and Your Office is Simply a Guest Room: This might be a strange way to think about your office and isn't actually true.

But the fact is, your pastor has a sense of ownership of the entire church - including the office space - like it is their actual house, and your office space is within their sense of ownership. It is the same battle parents have with kids since the dawn of time. Kids want to keep their room any way they want, and parents want kids to realize their rooms are part of the parents' house and should be kept clean.

When we treat our offices like guest rooms by keeping them clean and professional, our pastors get to keep our relationships on the professional level. If your office is worse than the rooms of the students with whom you work, your pastor intuitively begins to feel like a babysitter and not a colleague. It may not be right, and they may not even own it, but this is a felt reality and therefore should be lived into.

Cleanliness = Respectability: When we have a clean youth room, office, youth van, clothes, we communicate we are adults and worthy of respect.

When you have respect you also gain the benefit of the doubt, and this comes in very handy. When you live in a way that gains respect from your colleagues and they don't feel like they need to babysit you, you gain the freedom to do the ministry God has called you to.

As you respect your office and place within the church staff, your pastor will grow in respect of you. And they respect you more and more, they naturally will become an advocate for you and for the ministry you lead.

Who knew that throwing away pizza boxes could actually lead to a raise 😊

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6) Love Their Kids

Most youth workers get into this profession because they have a huge heart for students. With all of our heart we want the lost to be found; the rejected to find community; and the broken, healed. We are thankful for the critical mass of church kids, but our eyes and heart seem to always look to the

horizon of where the lost and discarded students live. Sometime in our effort to run after the one lost sheep, we burn bridges with the 99; especially their parents. And of all the parents with whom we cannot afford to burn bridges with are our pastor's kids.

If you want your pastor to be your biggest advocate, and to advocate for your ministry, it is of utmost importance that you do everything in your power to win them over. Here are a couple of reasons we cannot blow off these kids; even if everything in us wants to.

They Are Your Weekly Job Evaluation: I know many of us get an annual review of our job performance. We have job descriptions, measurable goals, etc, that are the foundation of our evaluations. But I have found this to simply be a formality. The real job evaluation happens every week when their kids come home from youth group.

Week in and week out they hear about you and your ministry. And the worst part is, they don't express your heart, vision, or plan. They simply regurgitate the bare bones of what you teach; which always misses your extreme passion and brilliance. They are the quickest to complain about it being boring and their friends hated it. The worst part is, more than any parent, the pastor wants to know all of the details. They listen and try to read through the lines. And if every week they hear the consistent drip of how sub par your ministry is and how their kids don't really want to go, your brilliant plan and communication skills to the rest of the church WILL NOT MATTER.

Win Them First: We all make lists of the students with whom we are going to spend time. We have to determine with whom we'll meet, how often, in what context, and for what purpose. Most of us naturally connect with a specific type of kid. They are the ones with whom we naturally want to spend all our time.. And because many of us have a heart for outreach and students who aren't yet connected, these students often are the ones furthest from the church. This has to be tweaked. Even though the child of the pastor should be the most connected and make us the most uncomfortable, they must go to the top of the list.

The pastor's kid is the first kid to win over. They are the first kid to watch play sports, perform in a play, or appear in a concert. They are the first ones to take out to lunch. Whatever they are into, become an expert and do that with them. Our entire job is about winning students over. For better or worse, the pastor's kid is the first one we must win.

It May Not Be Fair or Right, But It Is Reality: Every week, our pastors get an unofficial evaluation from their kid. If their kids don't like us and don't connect, intuitively, we are set apart from our pastor. If they love us, we have built significant ties, trust and appreciation between the pastor and us.

The truth is, you are a professional youth worker. You were born to connect with any and every student out there. Make their kid your personal project. You have a ton of tricks up your sleeve and you gladly use them for every kid out there. Now focus those amazing gifts on the kid who intimates you and holds your future success at this church in your hands.

Love them, woo them, give them extra time and their voice extra weight. Ask them about their lives and what it is like being a pastor's kid. Being the kid of the pastor is a tough job. Walk with them in this. Give them space to express their love and hate of the church, their love and hate of Jesus, and even their love and hate of you.

Pastors' kids are some of the most important kids in your ministry. On one hand they are important because they can single-handedly sink your ministry. But they are also the most important possession and priority of the pastor. When their kids thrive, they thrive and are free to lead your church the way God has put on their heart to go. When their kids spiral and are visibly losing connection with the church and with their faith, they spiral.

Part of your job on staff is to be a support to your pastor and help them succeed. And the biggest felt need they have is - first and foremost- wanting their kids to be cared for. When you do that well, your pastor will be compelled to be thankful for you and the ministry you provide for his kids and the kids of the community. These strands of good will gives you freedom to be in a solid relationship with the pastor, and freedom to do the type of ministry God has put on your heart.

If you want your pastor to love you and respect your ministry, it begins with you pouring your guts into their kids.

5) Don't Forget To Love Them Too

Unchecked, all of us are incredibly self-absorbed people. We think the entire world revolves around us. Our life, experiences, jobs, joys, and our failures are really significant. While all of these experiences consume our every thought, everyone else around us doesn't spend much time thinking about them. This is mostly because they are consumed with their own story as well. This isn't a good or bad thing - just a thing.

As Christians, we are invited to remove our self out of the center of the universe and allow Jesus his rightful place there. Many of us can get our head around that. But what seems to elude most people is, this invitation is not to have a simple duet between Jesus and you. This invitation also allows other people and their stories to matter to you as well. And this truth could never be more important than with the story that consumes your pastor's thoughts.

Lead Pastor's Jobs Are Incredibly Challenging: Being a lead pastor is a lonely calling, warring on their emotions, confidence, and ego. When the buck stops with you, you are always offending someone. Continuous questions need answers; and you are expected to have not just your own act together, but your entire family's as well. Perpetually, they have a ton on their mind. How much could you improve their quality of life if you saw yourself as someone who is committed to loving and caring for them?

Remember the last time you preached in big church or came back from a big trip where you were in charge? Afterward, you spin, are consumed with the sermon or trip, and are dying for feedback. Positive feedback nourishes our soul, and negative or even the lack of feedback causes us to spin. This feeling isn't relegated solely to youth workers. Every pastor I know feels this way after every Sunday. What a simple way to love your pastor to give them so positive feedback regarding their sermon.

Of course you are such a better preacher than they are. When you preach, the church responds so much better. But as someone who is called to love others - especially your pastor - I am sure you can find a genuinely kind comment regarding what they taught and you can take away from it. For

extra points, ask them before the sermon what they are preaching on. They love processing their thoughts, and will enjoy the easy way to connect.

Get To Know Them As People: We spend our entire jobs winning students. We have an entire arsenal of tricks to connect with just about any type of person with any type of passion. We must use all of those tools to get to know our pastors. They are real people with real lives and actually still like to have fun. If you can figure out what they enjoy and do those things with them, you are on track to develop a good friend and colleague in ministry.

The best part is, it doesn't matter if you like it or not. You are invited to love them. And as we remove ourselves from center stage, we make room to go along with others in their story. If it is sports, kiss butt and follow their team. Even better, start following their rivals and let the smack talk fly. If it is reading novels, learn about them; if fishing, start to fish. If they enjoy running, get off your butt and run a little bit. If it is enjoying micro-brews, study up! Just like you do to love your students, read what they read, watch what they watch, ask a ton of questions, and become their friends.

It's On You To Initiate It : I know this isn't the way it is supposed to be, but it is the way it is. I have worked for three different lead pastors and every one of them was completely different. I am proud to say I have developed a warm friendship with all three. But this friendship was initiated by me.

It seems like it is ministry 101 to gather a team and care for those under your care. But I bet if all your volunteers had an opportunity to vent in some gathering of volunteers, they would all commiserate how little you care for them as individuals and how they feel like parts of the machine. The truth is, we don't do the best job either. As we mature in Christ and gradually remove ourselves from center stage, the more we can own our own garbage and get over ourselves in our quest to love others.

All that is to say, if you want a friendship with your pastor, you are going to have to initiate it. They have a difficult and lonely job. An opportunity to have a partner and a friend in ministry is usually a welcomed invitation.

Remember, they are old. The manner in which friendship happens, and in which they relate, will most often be different than what comes naturally to

you. Just as you are a cross-cultural missionary to your students, in the same way, be a cross-cultural missionary to your pastor and love them.

Love them as fellow members in the body of Christ, an elder worthy of respect, a colleague in ministry, and as the person who is carrying the weight of your entire church on their shoulders, is in desperate need of a partner to help carry the weight, and not someone who just piles it on.

What does your pastor do for fun? Join them this week. If you can't answer that question, you have some work to do. Good Luck!

4) Be Teachable:

We all love the opportunity to impart our great wisdom and insights to others. Remember how great it felt when someone genuinely wanted your opinion? You didn't have to muster up something fake to impress them. They were already impressed and wanted your wisdom. It builds you up, connects you to them, and is such a gift. With your pastor the same is exactly true, but this time you get to be the one who seeks wisdom and insight. When you do this, their confidence grows and their heart strands for you grow. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind.

- **Own your own junk:** You are the smartest person in the room and you have very little to learn from someone who is so old and has sold out to the bureaucracy of the church. You may not respect them or their leadership. You have absolutely zero desire to learn about anything except the things you are passionate about. We have garbage we bring to the table; which is why we don't want to take on the position of a learner with our pastor. But that is our issue and we need to figure out what it is and die to it.
- **Be the Grasshopper:** If you can get your head around the idea that they are the master and you are the student, you will end up being the one who is blessed. Your pastor wants to disciple and impart wisdom. They have been doing this a long time and have thought, prayed and wrestled through a lot of stuff. If you place yourself in a position to learn, these are mistakes you won't have to make someday. I admit, sometimes it is rough when my pastor gets all excited and begins to "teach" me something I already know, but those experiences are dwarfed by growth in our relationship. All it takes is simply asking good questions and keeping your mouth shut.

- **Learn about things not specifically in your area:** Your world is student ministry and that is great. Their world is larger church issues, polity, budget, and raising older children. They have very firm convictions and thoughts about baptism, worship styles, leadership strategies. They have to come up with a fresh and life-changing sermon every single week. You get to do it a couple times a year and think about how much time and effort you put into it. Pick their brain about how and why they preach on the topics they choose. When new staff is hired and fired, ask questions, learn how to be a supervisor. These are all important nuggets for you to grow as a pastor; plus there is a benefit of building friendship and loyalty with your pastor in the process.
- **You will not be doing youth ministry forever:** When you are done with student ministry, and if God happens to call you to lead a church, wouldn't it be great to have thought about, wrestled with, and have resources regarding all the issues that will surface in this new position? By being a learner you will be 5-15 years ahead of the curve if you have positioned yourself to be teachable and learn about things besides your current position and passions. If you do this well, you will also have a life long friend and companion in ministry - the old guy or gal who you can call in a pinch and who will give you wise counsel and care when you need it the most.

What are some things you can learn from your pastor this week?

3) Document Everything:

You have to admit youth workers have really strange jobs. One of the hardest things about our job is to quantify what we do. We work in relationship first, program second, and quantified results – well, never.

There isn't really a right or wrong way to do our job. Everyone does this job differently. We each take different amounts of time to accomplish certain tasks. But these realities cannot be cause to overlook the fact that we are paid by the church; and as an employee, we are going to be held accountable for what we are doing with our time.

The truth is, most youth workers I know work incredibly hard and way more than the hours for which they are paid. But, for whatever reason, somewhere along the way we get in trouble because our pastor has no idea

what we are doing. An easy solution that both covers our own butts as well as shows our pastor we are in the trenches working hard together is to document everything!

- **What do you do with your hours?** You are paid for a certain number of hours. So, figure out how you spend your time. For a season, document how you spend it. When you are in the office, what are you doing? Write it down and share it with your pastor. It is also a good gut check for you to spend less time on Facebook and reading blogs 😊. With whom do you spend time? Why do you spend time with them? What do you do when you are together? When you are not in the office, where are you? Why are you there? Your pastor - or at least your secretary - needs to know this. Even though you can technically work from home, make sure to put in some office time. At the end of the week and month, write up a summary to give to your pastor or the board. Even if they don't ask for it, have it anyway so at any point you have documentation of what you have been doing.
- **Have a calendar and use it!** I am sure you have great ideas for your student ministry and amazing events up your sleeve. You can win over your pastor and parents if you simply share these great ideas and their purpose. For whatever reason, it is just the silly and crazy events people hear about or get us into trouble. When our pastor knows how all of our events fit together in a comprehensive strategy, you will be speaking their love language. I strongly encourage you to be calendaring your events a year out; three months out if you are in your first couple of years doing this gig.
- **How are you growing?** You are / should be spiritually growing. You should be reading scripture, books, blogs, magazines, etc. It is encouraging and helpful for your pastor to know you are continually working out your stuff. Make sure you share with them what you have been reading and how it impacts you. You are growing spiritually, professionally, personally. When you run out of things to read, ask them for some ideas. Another great strand.
- **THE BIG NO NO!** Documenting everything helps your pastor know what you are doing and is encouraged by the ways you are spending your time partnering with them as you care for the church and the community. It gives them ammo when people question what

you are doing. But none of the mountains of good will you have earned will count if you don't document the most important thing: MONEY! Document how and why you spend it, what comes in and what goes out. Turn in your receipts promptly and accurately. And whatever you do, DO NOT GO OVER BUDGET!! If you want to be a short timer, be lackadaisical regarding finances. This is the number one quantitative issue that will sink you about as fast as making out with a high school-er.

Your pastor wants to trust and partner with you as your care for the church and the community. Give them all the reasons in the world to be encouraged by the hard work you are doing. Give them all the answers to the questions parents and leaders may have about you and your ministry; and take away all reasons for them to be weary of you. Take the extra time to document everything and be ready for an answer to whatever questions come your way!

2) Keep Your Ego in Check:

If you were brutally honest with yourself, you would agree that you are a pretty big deal. You are amazing and people at your church think you are doing a fantastic job. Whenever you preach you get glowing feedback and you are often juxtaposed from your stodgy boring pastor and their preaching performance. Your circle of influence is impressed with your vision for the church and your strategy to get there. With all the great things you think about yourself combined with others adoration of you and your gifts, it is easy to start to think maybe you should be the one in charge of this church. If this thought has ever entered your brain, *YOU MUST KILL IT!*

You were hired to do youth ministry, you are probably doing a great job and others are impressed with the work you are doing. But having people love you as their youth worker and love you to where they want you to split the church and have you take over are two different things. IT IS NEVER OK FOR YOU TO TRY AND TAKE OVER YOUR LEAD PASTOR! They have been called by God and the congregation to do that job. You were hired to do yours. No matter how you justify it in your brain, it is never okay. You are called to support, lift up, encourage, and speak well of your

lead pastor. If you have the burning desire to be “the man”, go somewhere else and give it a try.

While you are working here doing student ministry, your number one task is to be a good partner to your pastor. There is only so much space in the room for ego; and since you are not the top of totem pole, it is good and right to spend some time and effort dying to yours and building up theirs. Here is the simplest way to pull this off:

Speak kindly and warmly about them, ALWAYS:

- Just like you would want people to speak of you in any and every context, you can return the favor by doing this for your pastor. It is in our rebellious nature to always want to tear down the people in charge, but we must fight that urge, build them up and not be a part of others bickering and complaining.
- Remind yourself and your congregation of the best of who your pastor is and never miss an opportunity to share it with your students, your congregation, and with your friends. They have a deep love for Jesus and for your church. The people upon whom you have influence should know that.
- Even if you have to work really hard to muster it up, find it. And if by some chance they really are the problem. . .

If the pastor truly is the problem:

- Whatever you do, do not get caught in the middle of this awful mess. Your pastor is not accountable to you. They are accountable to the elders, session, or board. They will figure out the problem, discipline accordingly, and even let go if they have to. They will have plenty of evidence and information to do this apart from you. Plus, if it doesn't happen, you have just chopped off your own head and will be quickly looking for another job.
- You were hired to love students. No matter what chaos is happening in the upper reaches of church polity, this rarely - and I might add, never - involves you. Do your job, keep your ego in check, and speak well of your pastor.

No matter the chaos, no matter how good a youth worker you are, the more you keep your ego in check and build up your pastor, the more their heart for you and your ministry will grow. Good luck with that. 😊

1) Do a Good Job:

It is kind of going all the way back to the beginning. Remember, this is about how to make your pastor a huge fan of student ministry. At the end of the day, the way in which you make them a huge fan of student ministry is by making them a huge fan of you. And the best number one way you can do this is by, simply, doing a good job.

When you work hard and do a good job, your pastor's heart towards you will grow. By excelling in what you have been hired to do, you will find your pastor will; believe in you, trust you, and will want you to succeed even more. By wanting you to succeed, they will want your ministry to succeed.

But here is the rub: How do you determine what counts as doing a good job?

We all know we are the best and are doing a great job. I have never in my entire life met a fellow youth worker who thought they were a slacker, sitting around cashing pay checks as they eat all the pizza they could ever dream of. No, we all think we are the hardest working people on the planet. While this may be true in our heads, the fact is, there are plenty of youth workers I have known who have gotten canned for doing a horrible job. And most of the time - when I hear the stories - I agree. They should have been fired.

The issue is not about working hard and doing a good job. The key is figuring out how you are graded and do that. You may have built the most amazing weather station showing the changing rainfall levels throughout the year for a science fair. But since you didn't realize it was a physics science fair, all the time and effort that went into this project turned out to count for nothing. The same is true with student ministry. You must find out what you are actually being graded on, and do that first.

Whether they realize it or not, every pastor has a rubric in which you are graded. Sometimes it is stated very clearly. But I have found it is usually

hidden. No matter the health of your pastor or how well they communicate, it is VITAL that you figure it out.

Here are some rubrics I have encountered:

1. Numerical Growth
2. Spiritual Growth
3. Attendance in Big Church
4. Being Safe
5. Simply not wanting to deal with upset parents
6. Teaching Tradition
7. A certain mission trip or camp
8. Dressing nicely for church, or even around the office
9. Being in the office
10. Not being in the office

It is of utmost importance to figure this out; because if you don't, you will be out of a job. While you may seem to have a sob story about why you got fired, the truth is, you simply did not do the job you were hired to do. I know it is unfair that you may actually get fired for an unspoken expectation, but it is how it works sometimes. Find out what you are graded on and do that well!

Once you have done what you are being graded on well, you will have the latitude to do the specific things that are unique to you, your personality, and your calling. If you fail to get a passing grade first, you will never be able to do the second.

My hope and prayer for you as a youth worker is to fully live into the unique ambassador of Christ that God has called you to be. You have so much to bring, so many talents, such passion, and such a huge heart. Don't let your passion and idealism blind you to the awful truth that youth ministry within a church is also a job. Do your job well, and then be free to live out your calling.

If that can't happen in your particular church context, then start looking for another job. You will never change the DNA of your church, until you find

the church that matches your DNA, be faithful in the small things, and God seems to always open up doors down the road. (see Joseph).

Good Luck!

>>

Bonus:

This last year I wrote a throw-away blog post as a way to let off a little steam from a very disappointing fall kick off. It really struck a nerve and didn't fit anywhere else, but thought I should include it somewhere, so here you go! Blessings.

What happens when parents and kids see youth group as simply an elective?

For the past few years it has been obvious that the culture in which we do ministry has fundamentally changed.

I know pop culture continues to devolve into twerkfests on MTV, but that is nothing new. What I am seeing that is new is, the Christian adults within this culture have a totally different worldview and values than those Christians who have gone before them.

There was a time in youth ministry's hay day where a youth group was made up of the kids of that particular church and their friends. It was important for the kids to be a part of youth group - and if it wasn't important to the kids, it was at least important to the parents. In fact, much of my early years of student ministry was bemoaning the fact that so many church kids would be forced to come to youth group and cause trouble for my leaders and me. If I only knew how good I had it.

Now, students along with their parents see fellowship, gathered worship, church, and youth group as electives.

Our post-modern, determine-your-own values and reality has finally trickled its way into the local church. Carey Nieuwhof wrote an excellent blog about "The 15 Characteristics of Today's Unchurched Person.

(<http://careynieuwhof.com/2013/04/15-characteristics-of-todays-unchurched-person/>).

These 15 characteristics are spot on. But I would actually go further and say they are not just characteristics of today's unchurched person, but of every person both in and out of the church. These days, church, youth group, and actually any spiritual discipline are firmly on the bottom of the pecking order. This means that if homework, sports, vacation, being tired,

practice, fill-in-the-blank don't conflict, students as well as their parents might consider attending some gathered Christian event like church or youth group.

For adults, this elective version of church involvement doesn't really have any

short-term consequences to their faith. Most Christian adults had some incredible experience in late high school or college and are maintaining that same faith as they go through the rest of their life. They can take months or years off of church and fellowship and still have a mostly intact faith.

While there is a ton to say about this new cultural expression of Christianity, the parents here are not my concern. My concern is for the faith development of their kids.

These adults have had a significant faith encounter in their youth, but are not helping their own kids participate in the very activities God used to grab hold of their own hearts when they were younger. And unlike their parents, any significant break in community makes it next to impossible for the adolescent to ever really enter the group later.

Students are relational animals and will only participate in an environment where they have friends, and feel welcomed and cared for.

Even the least cliquy youth groups on the planet still have relationships - and those relationships have history. If a group of students spend a year doing youth group together; Bible studies; go to the movies, roller skating and skiing; and go on a mission trip together, a history develops. A student who chooses youth group simply as an elective and misses out on these memory-making events will naturally feel on the outs. Once they feel this way, there is little incentive for them to commit.

Add to this the fact that they culturally don't feel a need to participate, feel little spiritual guilt, and see little necessity for the gathered experience, these poor students don't really have a chance!

For the sake of their children, adults need to model that commitment to Christian worship and fellowship is not an elective.

This goes against every cultural trend. But for the sake of our kids and our students we are called to love and care for, may we help the adults in our lives go old school in their Christian understanding. As much as faith in Jesus is about a "personal relationship" it can only be worked out in

community. And community only happens with students through a safe environment that is authentic, consistent time together; building memories and spurring one another on toward love and good deeds!

May we, in a loving and gracious way, sound the alarm and make the case that involvement in student ministry is not an elective course in faith development, but vital for the faith formation of our students.

Conclusion:

For as much angst as I feel about this calling to youth ministry, when I take a step back, I am convinced it is the best job in the entire world. Think about it. Our job is to simply love Jesus and to help students love Him too. This is it!

After doing vocational youth ministry for almost 20 years, I am starting to settle down and realize there is nothing new under the sun. After a mere 18 months, every youth worker knows everything they need to know in order to run a successful student ministry. After those initial 18 months, it is simply about spiritually and relationally drilling deep!

If you are in those first 18 months, keep reading, learning and refining. Be humble and teachable. Ask for help. Build a program that works for your context and your personality. Don't do what I do - or what the person down the street or the biggest churches do. Do what you do, and do it well! The learning curve is steep. But it levels out into a nice plateau sooner than you realize. What separates those who cycle through jobs every 18 months or less, and those who do student ministry for the long haul, is what you choose to do after those 18 months.

For those of my colleagues who are past the initial 18 months, I have a few words of advice. Truthfully, these words of advice are directed right back at me as well:

Do Justly: We have a high calling. We are blessed with standing in the gap, walking alongside adolescents during the most chaotic and vulnerable seasons of their life. We need to understand that while it seems like we have no power in the context of the larger church and our staff org chart, in the life and the particular students who are part of your youth program, you are it! You have power and influence; you represent Jesus! Who you are and how you behave is absorbed by the students in your ministry and this sacred honor must not be taken lightly. *May we represent Jesus and stand up for the underdog, not play favorites, pursue personal purity, and always do right by our students and their parents, for the sake of the Gospel!*

Love Mercy: With students, perception is reality. How a student perceives their place in your youth ministry, and with you, is reality. Students know the world is in total chaos. They are fickle in their passions, faith, and convictions. From the adult perspective, it feels so good to drop the

hammer of truth on them. But this will only further alienate them, and reinforce their perception of the church being judgmental and not welcoming to them. *May we remember that we are the adults, and we will be the ones to be generous with mercy. May we forgive, not hold grudges, and not put students in boxes from they cannot escape. May we remember how fickle we were when we were adolescents. May we have grace, empathy, and mercy for the precious students we are called to love!*

Walk humbly with our God: It is easy to confuse ministry, sermon prep, and disciplining students with your own faith development. But the truth is, we are no longer adolescents, and we must differentiate our faith from those of our students. What our students need for their faith development should be different than what we need for our own. This means we have to do double duty! We have to work out our faith with fear and trembling; then discern through the Holy Spirit what our students need. *May we continually recognize our need for Jesus, be conformed to His likeness, and be honored to be His partner in ministry. We are replaceable, and He does not need us one bit! May we never get too big for our britches, but continually walk humble with our savior and Lord.*

I love student ministry with all my heart and I count it an honor to still be a youth pastor after all of these years. I realize I should have been fired dozens of times and I am appalled at some of the choices I have made in ministry over the years. But thankfully, God is not done with me yet! It is only by His grace, the grace of my supervisors, and of my colleagues who have walked with me over the years that I am still in the game!

This can be a lonely job. If you find yourself alone or are looking for some support or collegiality, please don't hesitate to contact me. I love walking with fellow youth workers to refine our craft; and even more than that, I need colleagues to walk with me to encourage me to stay the course in this unique calling.

May all of us quit striving for greatness or name recognition, and simply settle in to being faithful to our calling. We don't need to be exceptional in the world of student ministry. Among our 10,000 colleagues, we simply need to be average. But for the particular students in our ministry, we must strive to provide excellent student ministry for them; so that by God's grace, some of them may come to know Jesus and love Him throughout their entire lives!

Blessings

Bk

Acknowledgements:

As I think back over my almost 20 year career in youth ministry, I am blown away by the people closest to me who have been a part of my professional and personal development. These are the people who have helped me keep my head in the game, my heart connected to Christ, and to actually get outside of myself and share some of the bits I have learned from both the Holy Spirit and the school of hard knocks. I would like to acknowledge some of the people without whose love and support I would no longer be in student ministry, and this book would never have been written:

Katie Kerns: To my dearest wife and partner in ministry. I am so thankful for your love, affection, support, and even correction. You are the wisest and most discerning person I know. I am sorry it has taken so long to learn that you are usually right. I am the man, husband, father, and Christ follower I am today because of your selfless investment in me. I love you with all my heart!

Ed Hart and Art Greco: Let's be honest. Both of you should have fired me several times. Even more than that, neither of you should have never have hired me in the first place. Each of you saw an unrefined pastor who loves Jesus and students, and took a chance on an untested youth pastor. I am forever thankful to have worked for you, for your friendship and for modeling faithful pastoral ministry. I love you both and am forever grateful for the way you have shaped my call to pastoral ministry.

Marti Burger: As I reflect on all the fun things I have gotten to do in ministry over the last ten years, they are all because you saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself. And in fact, I still don't even see. I am so grateful for your love and support for me, my family, and for my calling to student ministry. The way you empower people to lead and draw out the best in others has resulted in amazing ministry and a whole new generation of leaders with whom I am honored to be a part. You are my pastor and friend, and I am thankful for you and your entire family!

Phil Steiner: I love that God has knit our lives together over this last decade. You were my first friend when I moved here to Marin. Through God's grace, our lives have become intertwined. I am always encouraged by your love for Jesus and the way you actually step out in faith to the

things God has called you to do! You are the man of God, father, and pastor I long to be. I treasure your friendship and look forward to watching what God has in store for your ministry and you over this next season of life.

Ryan Reed: Ryan, you are the smartest person I know. In fact, I can't even believe you want to spend time with me. You are driven, sharp, gifted, and fun. You are the next generation of pastoral leadership, and give millennials a good name.

You put up with my Gen X angst and help me get my head out of my butt and be more hope-filled. Thank you for spurring me on to try new things and to never settle. I am honored to count you as my friend and am thankful to have gotten to share in ministry during our tour of duty in Marin.

Erik Anderson: You are the best youth pastor on the planet! This is no hyperbole. Your love for Jesus and for students is overwhelming. Your capacity to run a large program and not get lost in the details but keep your passion for Jesus as well as for students to meet Him, and be transformed by Him, is amazing. I often wish I could simply be a student in your ministry. I love you and am thankful for your love and affection towards me. You push me to love Jesus more, to become more whole and to have a true self-perception. Your family is a model to this entire world of the love and grace of Jesus, and has become shaping for my faith, ministry, and me.

Reid Olson: I love you Reid! The fact that you are still in ministry is a total miracle to me. You have lived the school of hard knocks and have not let that tear you down. But all of these unique and character building events through your tenure have been used by God to develop you into one of the deepest Christians and pastors I know. Every day I am thankful for our initial encounter where you invited me into our denominational family and simply saw me. And ever since, you have been a dear friend and confidant. You keep me sane and on course. You say it like it is, and are willing to speak truth into my life. Thank you for walking with me and for letting me walk with you while we work out our calls as pastors, fathers, husbands, and followers of Christ.

My Students: Even though I have had hundreds of students make their way through the doors of my student ministry, I am honored to have played a small part in your spiritual development. What is even more amazing and humbling is, for some of you, I have had the pleasure of continuing to walk

with you into adulthood and have watched in awe the way you have continued to love and serve Jesus. I get that middle school and high school are chaotic, and we adults are often the bad guys. I get that your inner life is incredibly private and often the most vulnerable part of who you are. And so I get what an honor it is that you have allowed me in. I have loved you, cried with you, poured my life out for you for the sole purpose that you might consider giving your life to Jesus and serve Him and be used by Him in your own unique and gifted way to expand the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven! Thank you for keeping me young and keeping me on my knees!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



After a career ending knee injury, I left competitive curling and have dedicated the last 15+ years of my life to loving students. I enjoy partnering with other youth workers to help students come to know and follow Jesus. I am a network facilitator for the pacific southwest for the Evangelical Covenant Church and have been a resource for other youth workers for the past 7 years. I still bring pizza to any and every youth gathering. And now have to run 20 miles a week to burn off the pizza weight in order to keep the love alive with my wife. I love my kids, baseball, writing, and my iPhone, and don't understand Twitter. For the past 7 years I have served at [Marin Covenant Church](#) as the Pastor to Children and Students. You can check follow my struggling Twitter account at www.twitter.com/averageym. I have the pleasure of speaking and teaching for youth events, youth worker gatherings, and every week to my ministry labratory known as my youth group. I have had the privilege to write for a number of websites and journals, and currently I am a contributor and curriculum writer for [youth ministry360](#), as well as [faithvillage.com](#). I also have the opportunity to

serve in my denomination, The Evangelical Covenant Church, on the [speaker team](#) and as a [youth ministry network facilitator](#).

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