

**Transformational Youth Ministry**  
**Mark D. Williams**

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## **Introduction**

In the summer of 1986, I answered the call to full-time vocational ministry in the local church during youth camp at Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina. My heart was set on being a youth pastor and leading youth “to see God for who He really is” and give their lives to Jesus.

This journey began immediately as the church recruited me to teach the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade boys Sunday school class. My youth ministry journey would take me from Memphis to Knoxville to Daytona Beach to Tampa to Orlando and back to Nashville. Over the course of 25 years, I worked with more than 1000 college students, teenagers, and children at 8 different churches. Hopefully I had half as much of an impact on them as they did me.

The book you have in your hand was written over the years while I was “in the trenches” serving as a youth pastor in different churches. Each chapter was first published/posted by a different youth magazine or website as an article for other youth workers to read. Many appeared on “The Net” posted by WillowCreek Community Church in Chicago. A lifelong dream was fulfilled when chapter 13 “Juggling Life, Family, and Ministry” was published as the cover story in an issue of Group Magazine.

Throughout my years of working in youth and college ministry, I witnessed too many churches providing “Youth Group” for teenagers to have fun and play games but there was no intentionality or strategy to transform the hearts and lives of their teenagers.

One my rallying cries throughout my 25 years of ministry was (and I guarantee you dozens of adult leaders and youth alike can say this with me): “Groups hang out, ministries change lives!” I desired to create a ministry that would transform the lives of the teenagers and then entire the family itself. Thus, the name for this book “Transformational Youth Ministry”.

Over time, I desired to help other youth workers understand this as well. The best way I could see was to communicate with them in every way possible.

For several years, I hosted a “Transformational Youth Ministry” conference for youth workers and their teenagers. These were incredible but only had an impact on a limited number of churches. I realized I need to get this message out in a more intentional way, and so I started writing and writing and writing. Every word of this book is based on my personal experiences in ministry. I pray this book transforms (see what I did there?) your thinking in ministry!

Pastor Mark D. Williams

## **Part 1: Developing Your Ministry Strategy**

### **Chapter 1: Building a Biblical Philosophy of Ministry**

As I imagine each of you reading this book today, I surmise that collectively your ministries provide a good representation of the many different models we see in student ministry today. Each student ministry has its own personality, but some ministries are more effective in fulfilling their Biblical purpose (to make youth disciples who love and serve Jesus for a lifetime) than others. How do we know what ministry model is the right one to use? Let's consider five different models of student ministry that I have seen (and used) over the past ten years.

- **Model #1: The “Fun-N-Games” Student Ministry**
  - Description: This is a student ministry based on fun activities, big events, and group games. The student calendar is filled with fun, fun, and well... more fun. The typical weekly meeting consists of fun (and messy) group games, silly songs, a short devotion, and usually an appeal to “accept Jesus” at the end.
  - Type of Student Created: The “American Idol” Student. In this model, the students are like Simon on the reality television show. They critique your every move. They long for the next “bigger and better” games, event, or trip. They are very focused on what they will receive rather than what they can give.
  - Ministry is driven by: Excitement
  - Ministry’s Main purpose for existence: Outreach
  
- **Model #2: The “Mountaintop” Student Ministry**
  - Description: This ministry is based on emotional experiences produced primarily by extended times of worship and retreat. A typical weekly meeting consists of extended times of both energetic and intimate worship and emotional appeals to be “more like Jesus”.
  - Type of Student Created: The “Fear Factor” Student. In this model, the students run off of adrenaline and emotion and are always looking for the next big spiritual “high”. They are often disappointed if a certain service doesn’t make them “feel” close to God.
  - Ministry is driven by: Emotion
  - Ministry’s main purpose for existence: Worship Experiences
  
- **Model #3: The “Holy Huddle” Student Ministry**
  - Description: This ministry is based on existing relationships, family ties, and traditions. The programs are designed to meet the needs of the existing students, especially those who have been at the church their whole life. The students are focused on themselves and spending time with each

other. Student “get-togethers” and “hanging out” are essential elements in this ministry model.

- Type of Student Created: The “Survivor” Student. In this model, cliques are rampant. The students may as well be divided into tribes. New people are viewed with suspicion and usually poorly treated. Students are often “voted out” and popularity dictates the leaders of the group.
  - Ministry is Driven by: Exclusion
  - Ministry’s Main Purpose for Existence: Safe place to hang out.
- Model #4: The “Bible College” Student Ministry.
    - Description: This ministry is based on Bible teaching and head knowledge. The yearly calendar is centered around training events and conferences. The average weekly meeting consists of as much worship as can be fit into 8 minutes, a few announcements, and 45 minutes of Bible study.
    - Type of Student Created: The “Jeopardy!” Student. In this model, the students are expected to be very serious about Bible study, scripture memorization, and theological knowledge. They learn to know the questions and the answers. How much you know is most important-not how much you love. This group is usually smaller in size because it is hard to find many students who want to pretend that they are going to Bible college.
    - Ministry is driven by: Ego
    - Ministry’s main purpose for existence: Biblical teaching.
  - Model #5: The “Hammer and Nail” Student Ministry
    - Description: This ministry is based on mission work and acts of service. The yearly calendar is filled with service projects, mission trips, and fundraisers. Often the weekly meeting is heavily focused on meeting the needs of others or cancelled to go out to do a service project. The summer mission trip is the focal point of the whole year.
    - Type of Student Created: The “While You Were Out” Student. In this model, spirituality is defined by compassion for others and willingness to participate in service projects. The students eventually feel that mission work is “superior” to other events in the ministry. They don’t feel close to God if they aren’t involved in mission work.
    - Ministry is driven by: Empathy
    - Ministry’s Main Purpose for Existence: Mission Work/Service Projects

Over the past ten years, I have found myself drifting towards each one of these models from time to time. When I was very young and lacked confidence, I played games and tried to provide as much fun as possible so that the students would like me. As that ministry grew, we began to focus heavily on passionate times of worship and intense emotional experiences. As students began to slip through the cracks before we could disciple them, I overreacted by leaning too far in the other direction and stressing far too heavily on Bible teaching and discipleship. Later, I served at the small “family” church

where I was compelled to create programs that focused on the “important” church families (who tithed). Finally, in a wounded church situation, I used mission work and service projects to help the students focus on more than the pain of the past.

Each of these ministry models are valid, and each one attracts students to the church (some more than others), but do they create students who love and serve God for a lifetime? I was often so disappointed when a student got his or her drivers license and disappeared from church until graduation Sunday. Once they graduated from high school, they left the church altogether. Their faith was temporary. The model of ministry that attracted them to the church could not keep them there for a lifetime. I felt like a failure. It was time for me to make a change in my way of thinking. What was wrong with these models of ministry? It became so clear to me...they represent a ministry *for* or *to* students. The focus is primarily on pleasing the students and keeping them involved in our ministries rather than on Jesus and what He wants to do in the life of each student.

In my description of these hypothetical models, I purposely created five exaggerated situations to correspond to the five purposes of the church (evangelism, worship, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry) as found in Acts 2:42-47. Each model we have discussed is a description of what happens when a ministry is out-of-balance, unhealthy, and overly focused on only one purpose. Like the first century church, our ministries should be balanced around the five purposes of the church. I am sure you have read much of this before, and I firmly believe that it is essential to base our ministries on the Biblical foundation and model of the New Testament church. However, I also believe that there is a more compelling reason to develop a balanced ministry—the life of Jesus. Jesus is our ultimate example and His ministry was balanced.

Consider the balance within the ministry of Jesus:

- Jesus must have been fun and exciting to be around because He was invited to wedding feasts and parties. He knew how to laugh and have fun.
- Jesus provided several “mountaintop” moments for His disciples. They witnessed great miracles, healings, and wonders beyond their belief. Three disciples, Peter James, and John, were even present at the transfiguration, and Peter, caught up in the moment, wanted to stop and build a monument for Jesus on that very spot.
- Jesus ate many meals with others and kept select and close company with His disciples. He enjoyed friendship and fellowship with others.
- Jesus knew how to preach and wasn’t afraid to teach deep radical new truths. The Sermon on the Mount is obviously the greatest sermon ever preached. He took time to teach and mentor His disciples. He was a great teacher of truth.
- Finally, Jesus had a heart for people. He fed the multitudes; He healed the sick; He had compassion on the broken-hearted. He taught and mentored His disciples to have the same heart to love people.

In the past, I have created the perfectly balanced ministry with impressive programs enhanced with amazing technology that greatly impressed our students and their families. Even so, much of what we did was empty of the power of God. Your students don’t need great programs nearly as much as they need Jesus in their life. Your model of ministry is simply the structure you use to help you students meet, fall in love

with, and passionately serve Jesus. Ministry has to be about Jesus and Jesus alone. Based on these thoughts, let me propose to you one more model of student ministry.

- The Biblical Model of Student Ministry: The “Disciple-Making” Ministry
  - Description: This ministry is designed to create fully-developed and fully-devoted student followers of Jesus Christ. The structure is well-developed, exciting, and creative, but the focus is Jesus.
  - Type of Student Created: The “little Christ” student. This ministry is designed to create multidimensional students who are actively growing in their relationship with Christ. This ministry equips students to do the work of the ministry. This is a ministry *of* youth not *to* or *for* youth. The focus is on what Jesus wants to do in the life of the student.
  - Ministry is driven by: a passion for Jesus.
  - Ministry’s main purpose for existence: to create student disciples who love God and serve Him for a lifetime.

How do we know which ministry model is the right model?

It is the model that Jesus Himself used and which empowers and equips our students to love and serve God for a lifetime. It is a ministry where we come along side our students to do the work of the ministry, and where our students step out and provide leadership and direction. It is a ministry *of* students who are passionately in love with their Savior and who serve for His sake. Let me challenge you now to think about your own ministry. Which model best describes your current ministry? Does your current ministry create students who are passionate about loving and serving Jesus Christ? If not, start again refocused on Jesus.

## Chapter 2 The Disciple-Making Model of Youth Ministry

In chapter 1, I challenged each of you to consider if the model of ministry you are currently using truly fulfills the Biblical purpose of student ministry. We agreed that this purpose is to create fully-devoted and fully-developed youth disciples of Jesus Christ. We discussed five different models of ministry which are good, but are not really effective in fulfilling this purpose. I then proposed what I consider to be the Biblical model of ministry—a balanced “disciple-making” model that Jesus Himself employed while developing His disciples. This ministry is described as follows:

- The Biblical Model of Student Ministry: The “Disciple-Making” Ministry
  - Description: This ministry is designed to create fully-developed and fully-devoted student followers of Jesus Christ. The structure is well-developed, exciting, and creative, but the focus is Jesus.
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  - Ministry is driven by: a passion for Jesus.
  - Ministry’s main purpose for existence: to create student disciples who love God and serve Him for a lifetime.

While chapter 1 goes to great lengths to describe the models which are less effective, further thought is needed to adequately equip you to implement the “disciple-making” ministry.

In this chapter, I would like to describe three key ingredients present in a functioning “disciple-making” student ministry: long-term relationships, teamwork, and visionary leadership.

### 1. Long-Term Relationships:

If we are going to see our students reach their potential in Christ, it can only occur through long-term ministry on our part. Changing churches every eighteen months might help our careers, but it usually sets the ministries we leave back several years. Obviously, there are some cases in which we have to leave after a short time in order to stay in the ministry or support our families, but, when possible, we will see the greatest results over years of consistent and faithful ministry. Students who experience constant turnover of leadership in ministry eventually fail to see the point in loving and trusting yet another new face. They lose interest and disappear, and each new youth pastor has to develop a whole new set of faithful students. In my experience, it takes at least two years to really begin to build relationships and trust with teenagers. Many of us leave a ministry before we ever experience the love of a group of teenagers, and we are the losers for it. Jesus certainly modeled this principle in three years that He spent, literally day and night, with His disciples. If we are to make student disciples, then we have to be around long enough to develop relationships with the students we are trying to lead.



As we have previously established, one of the foundational tenets of this model is that is it a ministry *of* students rather than being a source of entertainment *for* students. Once you get the organizational aspects of your ministry in place, it takes time for you to develop relationships and plug students into appropriate places of service. Equipping students to do the work of the ministry takes more than a few months; in most cases, it takes years of prayer and hard work. For instance, you cannot develop a great worship band who leads worship with maturity and which develops other students to play and sing for the future in just a few months. Neither can you equip older high school students be servant leaders in just a few conferences or meetings. You must be willing to invest quality time into both your ministry and students if you desire to see God do mighty things in your ministry. You must commit yourself long-term if you desire to see a long-term impact on your students.

## 2. Teamwork.

Ministries that create youth disciples do so from a team approach. By ourselves, we can only truly impact a small number of students, but with a team we can reach many. Many of us develop the attitude that our ministry essentially rests on our shoulders---but it shouldn't have to. If a disciple-making ministry is based on long-term relationships, there is a better chance that your church members will be involved in the lives of your students long after you are gone. If you think that you are more capable of making a difference in the life of a student because you are a "paid" youth pastor, you couldn't be more wrong. I learned long ago that I needed to surround myself with like-minded adult leaders (who understand and support the vision of the ministry) who love teenagers and desire to see them grow in their faith. These adults often can make a better connection with a student than we ever can. I am deeply touched than when I see a student praying with his or her small group leader at a camp, retreat, or just at church. I sense God's pleasure when my ministry team works to make Jesus the focus of our ministry.

Not only do you need a team to build relationships with all of your students, but you also need that team to help you implement an exciting ministry structure. Too many of us selfishly keep all of the fun stuff in ministry to ourselves. Sure, we might complain about not having any help, but honestly we are too lazy to take the time to develop others to help us with our ministry. It is easier for us to just "do it ourselves" than to invest in others and equip them to help us do it. If we are to develop exciting "over-the-top" programs that reach many students, we must rely on the hands of the student and adult leaders to help us provide high quality programs that honor and give glory to God. While I reserve the honor of preaching for myself and our pastoral staff, I use adults and college students to lead small groups, to teach Bible studies, to oversee fellowships, to plan and coordinate events, to run sound and lights, to develop media presentations, to lead drama teams, and much more. Each one of these activities gives my adult leaders the opportunity to develop relationships—the key ingredient to building a "disciple-making ministry. You cannot build this ministry alone, you shouldn't even try.

## 3. Visionary Leadership.

In order to develop a "disciple-making" ministry, we, as youth pastor, have to be able to provide some ground-breaking visionary leadership and direction. You cannot expect students to get excited about doing something that your ministry has done for the

past 18 years. We must be in tune and in touch with God's fresh leadership in our ministry. If we are successful in creating youth disciples, those same youth disciples will want to attempt projects your ministry has never done before. What is your vision for the future? If you don't articulate a vision for the future of your ministry, it is likely that you don't have a vision for equipping your students either. Even though we want to develop a great team to serve in our ministry alongside us, we have to be the person who hears from God and paints a picture for the future. Hopefully, we see that God desires for us to create ministries which help students love God and serve Him for a lifetime. Exactly how that looks in your own context is determined by your leadership.

Being in one of the larger churches in our area, I recently caught on to the fact that God wanted us to share some of our wealth with other smaller churches in our community. Because of our size and resources, we are able to provide opportunities (worship band, drama team, media, etc.) for our students that other area churches can't provide. We first started by hosting a special community-wide version of our normal Wednesday night youth worship we call CrossPointe. Though over ten other churches attended, our students provided leadership for every aspect of the service. This was a significant stepping stone for my leadership team to understand that they could actually "do" ministry. We have now hosted three such services. Also, this past fall, we hosted a youth ministry training event for area youth pastors and their volunteers. I used my student leadership team to run the café, to direct traffic, to lead worship, and perform dramas, and just basically help out. After the event, instead of talking about the sessions, most of the youth pastors wanted to know how I was able to get my students to take on so much responsibility and to be so active in my ministry. The answer was simple---I let them and I challenge them. If all we ever let our students do in our ministry is read the announcements or take up the offering, we shouldn't wonder that they are not very excited about becoming leaders. But if we allow them to become leaders in both their church and community, then it's amazing what God will lead them to want to do next!!! Are you providing a vision that challenges students to go places they have never been before? Your students deserve an exciting ministry where they see no boundaries only opportunities for growth and leadership.

You may be thinking that your ministry is "good enough" and that your church is happy with your leadership. The more important question is whether God is pleased with the leadership of your ministry? I believe that He is pleased when students are influenced to love Him and serve Him *for a lifetime*. This can only happen if your ministry is designed to help facilitate this in the lives of your students through long-term relationships, teamwork, and your visionary leadership.

## Chapter 3

### Defining True Success in Youth Ministry

Years ago, I was at a national student ministry convention with thousands of other student pastors. Part of the morning included gathering by region and networking with other student pastors in our area. “How many students do you have in your ministry?” was the question I was asked repeatedly all morning—actually all weekend. I began to wonder if this was all that mattered. After the first few times, I began to answer “a good number” or “a bunch”. Each time an accurate count of my actual numbers was requested. I could discern a sense of competition had arisen among us, and I wondered what God thought of all these ministers posturing and comparing their ministries. Through my observations, I noticed a curious trend. Student pastors would almost apologize if they had a “small ministry” while those with the largest ministries made sure we all knew how big their numbers really were. I wondered that weekend if we have lost perspective in terms of “success” in American youth ministry. While we compare and count our sheep, our existing ministries are not very effective in reaching and discipling teenagers to maturity in Christ. If our ministry lives and perspectives rise and fall on how “successful” we feel our ministries are, then I fear we may have lost our way.

In this chapter, I want to identify four false indicators of success and then paint a picture of the Biblical model of success.

#### **Four False Indicators of Success:**

##### **1. Big Numbers.**

In my early days of ministry, numbers were everything for me. I counted everyone that entered our building for a program and reported it weekly to our pastor. If we had a low attendance one night, I was usually depressed and discouraged. On the other hand, if we were bursting at the seams, I was excited and pumped up about everything. I went to ridiculous lengths to get students to bring more students on “friend” nights (this even included kissing a sheep on the mouth!?!). The more our numbers grew, the more impressed I felt our church was with the youth ministry. When we began to top 100 students each week, I was convinced that I had reached a new level of success in ministry. However as the years passed in ministry and these students began to leave the church after high school (or “graduate from their faith” as Doug Fields puts it), I began to wonder what I was doing wrong. *Big numbers without long-term faith* just didn’t seem to add up in my heart as “success”.

##### **2. Packed Calendars and Big Budgets**

Before I had children, my wife and I had “all the time in the world” for the youth at our church. They were our family, and we planned to spend as much time with them as possible. The monthly calendars were overflowing with fellowships, skate nights, outreach events, worship services, trips, and anything else we could fit into each week. I remember having a group of parents request a meeting with me about a year into a particular ministry. I was expecting lots of encouragement and praise, but instead received a request to “have mercy” on them as parents. They complained that their teenagers were never home, that they were really tired of driving to the church everyday,

and that they felt bad if they told their youth that they couldn't participate in a church-related activity. I was stunned. I was sure that "successful" ministries had something going on virtually every night of the week. Additionally, bigger successful ministries planned bigger and better events each year which required more and more money in the youth ministry budget. My ministries fell into the cycle of more kids were drawn by more activities which required more money. As each number grew, I felt more important and successful. And yet, in my heart, somehow all of this *activity without direction* didn't really feel like "success".

### **3. Praise and Adoration**

As my smaller ministry grew into a large army of youth *supposedly* carrying the banner of Christ, I was showered with compliments and affirmation from every direction in my church. The pastor was pleased, most of the parents were happy, and the senior adults thought "that kid we hired to play with the youth" was doing a great job. I began to hear and believe statements that started with, "If it weren't for you...." The students cried if anyone brought up the possibility of me one day leaving the church. The Lord blessed our ministry, and it became "the" youth ministry in our community. My head grew so big I transported it in a trailer behind the church van. And through all of the applause, in my heart I wondered if all of this success was really "success".

### **4. Conversions and Baptisms**

Having a growing ministry with a busy calendar in an excited church isn't actually enough to reach the highest level of success in ministry. With all of those events (that cost all that money) designed to draw all of those students comes the expectation that each month new students will actually be willing to trust Christ as Savior, to make a public profession of that faith, and to be baptized in the main church services. Some churches apply more pressure on the youth pastor for this than others, but most of us have been guilty being overeager in leading a new student to faith in Christ in an effort to validate our ministries as more than clean entertainment. I have personally led too many students to make spiritual decisions who I knew were confused and needed more time to consider the claims of Christ. My motivation usually was to produce conversion numbers that would impress my pastoral staff. Each week, with "every head bowed and every eye closed" I wondered in my heart if I would be "successful" if no one raised their hand.

Well, a funny thing happened in my ministry life---I grew older and many of my first students graduated and became adults. Unfortunately, too many of them are not involved in church and are not living out their faith like they did as teenagers. I couldn't understand how a "successful" ministry like mine didn't produce students who loved God and served him for a lifetime. Then the thought occurred to me---maybe I wasn't as "successful" as I thought. Maybe my ministry was built around the success principles of the world and not of God. I began to wonder how God would define success. God prompted me to ask myself this simple question, "What is the goal of my youth ministry?" After much prayer and reflection, I answered that it was ultimately to make *myself* seem important. The moment this thought came to mind, I was broken with shame. I truly had a love for youth and wanted to see them grow in their faith, but I had a greater need to be loved and wanted and appreciated. I confessed this to God and asked

Him to show me His ways. Over time, God taught me that He created ministry so that His people could come to love Him and serve Him for a lifetime. Looking back on my past ministries, this had never been the clear focus of what we planned. The thought was always there to teach students to love God, but we never had a plan to teach them to serve Him for a lifetime. Immediately, my perspective concerning my ministry began to change. I stopped counting every teenager (or stray dog) who wandered by, I cleared the unnecessary events from the calendar, I avoided the “Hallelujah Chorus” that followed me around singing my praises, and I repented for my approach to evangelism. I prayed for God’s leadership in restructuring my ministry and read every new resource available for youth ministry. The result: over the years, my ministries have produced some students who love God and who desire to serve Him for a lifetime.

Today, I am convinced that my ministry is successful every time I have lunch with a college-aged student who tells me about the new church and new ministries they have “plugged into” at college. I can sense that God is smiling and I am encouraged by His approval. I drive back to the church excited about my next time to influence the “bunch” of students God has placed under my care. It feels good to be “successful”. As for that trailer I dragged behind the church van, I dropped it off for the student minister at the “big” church across town.

## **Part 2-Working With Teenagers**

### **Chapter 4**

#### **Dealing with Violence in Your Ministry**

In my twenties, I was serving in a large church and our student ministry was a success, growing and changing lives on a weekly basis. I was entering my third year of leadership and was anticipating another tremendous year of growth and transformation. But, by the end of that year, the students were scattered, I was distracted with other serving opportunities, and the ministry was struggling. Our problems all started with one student, but, as I learned, one student is all it took.

One Wednesday evening as our students were gathering for our student worship service, a teenager I'll call John walked into our student sanctuary, backhanded a girl to the floor and proceeded to beat one of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys against a column in the wall. Apparently, as I learned later, this student had gang ties and had claimed one of our 7<sup>th</sup> grade girls as his own. Interestingly enough, this girl did not even know this young man. By the time I interceded, both students who had been attacked were injured and I was his next target. He jumped into my face and proceeded to threaten and abuse me as I walked him out of the room. One of my leaders had already called the police who arrived about the time I got him to the parking lot. I let the police handle him and went back in to salvage our service for the evening. By the time the service was over however, I had to be escorted to a secure location in the building because the boy's mother was waiting outside to settle the score with me. This was only the beginning.

Week after week, more and more of his "gang" came to our services just to disrupt and intimidate me. It did not take long to attract the local rival gang in the community on a weekly basis as well. One particular evening I noticed we had an unusually high number of students wearing dark red and powder blue sitting on opposite sides of our sanctuary. I alerted my leaders that I thought we had a potential situation and that we should be prepared for anything. "Anything" took about thirty minutes. In the middle of a video clip I heard the original problem child yell, "If you don't do it, I will!" and within seconds both gangs met at the center of the room for an all out brawl. Several of my adult leaders suffered minor injuries trying to break up the melee. As the parents came to pick up their students from church, they were greeted by a number of squad cars with lights flashing in our parking lot. I became public enemy number one. My church parents tried to be supportive, but I couldn't blame them for pulling their teenagers from our program-I was scared to come each week myself. As you can imagine, attendance and enthusiasm for our program plummeted, and I was left discouraged.

Over the next few months as the church students slowly returned to worship, they found a radically different environment. We had to eliminate many of the more appealing aspects of our service because we had to be able to clearly see every student, and the new rent-a-cop standing in the back of the room didn't help the ambiance. The defining moment came later that spring when I got a call from a parent who had heard from their son that John was bragging about killing me at our next worship service. I had heard that John had a reputation for carrying a gun and believed that it was possible. The next evening in worship, John did not show up until I started my message, then he stood in the back center like he and I were about to duel it out. He did not carry out his threat, but the

memory of that experience lives on in my life and the lives of those students who attended that night.

For the gang students, ruining my ministry and removing me from my position became a crusade. They passed around petitions at the local high school calling for my removal. Unbeknownst to them, I was actively and aggressively working to get out of there as fast I could. I found another ministry far away and conveniently resigned my position citing “God’s leadership in my life”. That was many years ago and I am still look back with sadness over the loss of that ministry and those relationships. I have had many hours to consider what God was doing during that year of my life. Looking back, he taught me some things that every minister should consider about violence in his or her ministry. I’ll share a few thoughts with you now.

First, be prepared for everything and anything to happen in your ministry. Understand that many problem students live by no common “rule” of behavior and they may neither know nor care about the standards in your ministry. Once you discover that you have one of these students hanging around your ministry, call the local police and ask for any information concerning prior arrests and violent tendencies. If the student has done something once then he or she probably will be willing to do it again. Be wise and develop a relationship with the local law enforcement of your community. Also, keep the rest of the pastoral staff involved with any situation as much as humanly possible. The last thing you need is for your pastor to hear about these kind of situations second-hand from upset parents. Involve the pastoral staff in helping you make decisions and create new policies and standards. Request that they attend any programs you have in which anticipate problems. Request their complete support and backing for your ministry and if they won’t give it, pray about moving to another ministry.

Second, network with other youth pastors and para-church ministries who work with at-risk teenagers. Their experience and wisdom could help you avoid a disastrous situation down the road. Read recent books and articles that address this subject. Contact and (if possible) visit detention centers, rehab clinics, and counseling centers in order to better understand the life context of these types of students. Specifically train your adult workers about how to deal with these students. Don’t assume that loving them with “the love of the Lord” is the best approach. If your church will make a commitment to reaching these students, bring in a professional to help your team develop an overall strategy. Realize that not every adult worker in your ministry is cut out to work in this situation; focus on those who have a genuine compassion for these students.

Third, develop a plan and process on how you will reach and disciple violent, at-risk students in your ministry. Realize that your normal church programs may not be designed to meet their needs. If you attempt to assimilate these students into your regular programs, you may end up alienating all of your students (and some parents as well!). A good rule of thumb is if they are not allowed to attend school with average students, then it may not be best to assimilate them into the programs with your average students. Provide alternative Bible study small groups for them and their friends to be led by an adult with a similar background who can understand what real success is with these students.

Fourth, stand your ground, but let God fight for you. Protect the students of your ministry in every way possible keeping in mind, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of power from you. Do not knowingly risk your life at the hands of these students. I

should have handled things differently the evening we were concerned about John bringing a gun to our program. Today, I would move that service into an adult area or cancel it altogether. I don't think the students gained anything from the experience except the knowledge of the fact that I was certifiably stupid. When these students rise up against you, abuse you, slander you, attack you, and crusade against you, you need to find a place to hide beneath the wings of the Great Almighty and gather a team of prayer warriors around you.

Finally, never give up on reaching these students. Pray continually for God to work a miracle in their lives. I had the privilege of counseling John about surrendering his life to Christ after many months of arrests, confrontations, and even a death threat. A week later, he disappeared from our community completely and we never saw him again. Of the many at-risk students who attended our services that year, only a small handful showed any interest in the message of the gospel. Even so, I am convinced that these students noticed that we were going to love them no matter how they acted, and that we were going to share Christ with them unashamedly every chance we were afforded. If your ministry is attracting some unchurched, aggressive, non-traditional students, you should know that your commitment to reaching *ALL* of the students of your community is working. Whatever you do, don't run these students off or "get rid" of them. God sent them to you for a divine appointment. Make sure that you don't miss it!



## **Chapter 5**

### **Creating a Culture of Love and Acceptance with Teenagers**

Recently a group of parents requested to come and meet with our youth ministry staff to discuss some “concerns” that they and some other parents had about the direction of our youth ministry. It was obvious that they had been talking amongst themselves and with other families for a few months. Thankfully, these parents took the time to organize their thoughts into a written document that expressed their concerns in a non-threatening way. For the most part, their concerns were par for the course in ministry. But one of their concerns dominated the discussion in our meeting that night.

These parents were very concerned that our youth ministry was not a “safe place” for the students emotionally and spiritually. Stories of ridicule, bullying, exclusion, cliques, hatefulness, hazing, and more were circulating around with our families, and they were very concerned that our staff was doing little to address the situation.

As I sat and listened to the discussion progress, I realized that each family in the room was discussing their oldest child who had come into the youth ministry during the past few years. Together with their experiences in school, these parents were experiencing the brutalities of youth culture for the first time. While I consider this youth ministry to be one of the kinder, more gentler group of students with which I have ever worked, I had to acknowledge that these students were teenagers and that they were capable of being very unloving and hateful, even towards me.

These parents are very frustrated because they passionately believe that church should be a “safe place” where students can come and be loved and accepted for who they are, not a place to be mistreated like they are at school. They are frustrated and they want something done about it...now.

While I could have gone into a long drawn out explanation about how teenagers are usually a reflection of their parents and how the adult culture in the church also struggles with these same issues, I sensed that God was nudging me to take a closer look at our ministry and consider what could be done to help create a more loving and accepting atmosphere and culture with our students. Over the next few days, God impressed several important changes we could implement in our ministry immediately.

#### **1. Model the behavior you desire.**

If we really want our teens to create a culture of love and acceptance in our ministries, we need to be first in line to model this attitude and behavior. Too often teens deal with a “do as I say, not as I do” expectation from parents and other leaders in their lives. This type of double standard creates conflict and confusion in their lives. Do students expect to be warmly greeted by the adult leaders when they come? Are hugs, high fives, and knuckles freely given out each week? Do you and your adult leaders truly celebrate with

each student who comes with a story of making the team or passing the big test? Do you really pray for every request you promise to pray for? Teenagers feed off of the energy and atmosphere created by the adults each week. They have an innate sense of knowing when things aren't quite as they seem. If the teenagers aren't very loving, we have to look in the mirror and see if we really are loving them for who they really are, flaws and all.

## **2. Teach *and* Talk about it.**

As youth workers, we can always spend time preaching and teaching about the love of God and our responsibility to love one another. Bible studies and sermon series abound on this subject. But, when the message doesn't become the reality of your context, some teens can become frustrated with an "all talk" and "no action" situation. It never fails to amuse me when some of our most unloving and unkind students will come to me after a message on loving one another and make comments about how several other students "shoulda heard that one"!

That is why it is so important to do more than just teach and preach about it. We need to make it a casual topic in our everyday conversations as much as we can. Every conversation with a teenager is an opportunity to talk about Jesus and how He wants us to treat each other.

I recently talked with a girl who was having problems with another one of our students from our church really being two-faced and ugly to her at school. I reminded this girl that Jesus commanded us to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us." I encouraged her to practice extreme grace towards this other girl, using the life and attitude of Jesus as an example. I am not sure that she really wanted to hear that at the moment that she was hurting so badly, but she left with a resolve to love the other girl anyway. I gave her a big hug, reminded her that we are called to live like Jesus, and assured her that I would be praying for her the rest of the week as she tries to work this out.

Our students should become accustomed to being reminded on a regular basis of the kind of people God has called us to be.

## **3. Ask God to Intercede**

If we truly want to see the hearts of our teenagers changed, then we need to take them to the greatest source of love and acceptance in the history of mankind-Jesus. The life and love of Jesus is the perfect embodiment of God's love poured out for us. Where we can only model a loving attitude, the Holy Spirit can transform their hearts and minds to have the attitude of Jesus and the desire to honor Him in everything they do. Where we can only teach the students about loving one another, the Holy Spirit can actually give them the desire to love one another.

I am convinced that the reason that so many people in the church act just like people in the world is because their hearts have never been transformed by the love of Jesus Christ. Without a saving knowledge of Jesus, the Holy Spirit has no power to transform their hearts and teach them to how to become like Jesus. We need to ask God to invade our youth ministries with His love and to take over. Why keep struggling along under our own power, when we have the power of the living God at our disposal? If we truly desire to see our students loving and accepting one another, we need to turn them over into God's hands and trust His power to bring this change.

It has been a few weeks since my meeting with these parents, and I know not everything has been resolved to their satisfaction. Just this past Wednesday night I talked with two different high school girls who were upset and disillusioned with our ministry. They felt excluded and had been talked about behind their backs. I could only sit and listen and encourage them to love others in our ministry the way they wanted to be loved. These conversations occurred after our Senior Night service for our graduates...one of our most powerful and encouraging evenings of the year. As I walked out of the building to my car, I silently whispered a prayer for God to accomplish what I could not.

## Chapter 6

### Helping Students Make Spiritual Decisions

Not too long ago, a youth pastor friend of mine shared with me that he had recently endured his yearly evaluation. The sole basis of this evaluation was the number of youth baptisms his ministry had produced that year. Since there had been a fair number of baptisms, his evaluation had been favorable, but he was strongly encouraged to increase that number the next year. I was shocked. My ministry in a struggling declining church had produced only one baptism in over a year and a half. Several students had become Christians through our ministry, but for a number of different reasons, all but one had declined to be baptized in our Sunday services. I was sure glad that I was not being evaluated on this basis for I surely would have been searching for a new position in a different place. As our conversation continued, it dawned on me that his church was one of many that cared more about numbers and baptisms than changing the lives of hurting people.

At a recent conference, nationally-recognized youth evangelist Jay Strack estimated that as many as 88% of Southern Baptist teenagers leave the church when they graduate from high school. Some return to church when they have children, many never return at all. I believe this pattern exists in virtually every denomination. But how can this be? How could a student who made a seemingly sincere spiritual decision for Christ followed by believer's baptism prove to have so little faith when he or she graduates from our ministries? Why don't the spiritual decisions that our students make last for a lifetime? Let me share with you some of the causes I've discovered and offer a few cures to help us overcome this problem.

First of all, we as youth pastors must shoulder much of the blame. Let's face it, many of us don't have the job security that we need to work in complete freedom. Being overworked and underpaid, we feel the pressure to "be successful" in our ministry. We feel the pressure to produce numbers—numbers in our programs, numbers in our budget, and numbers in the conversion column. This pressure (whatever its source--pastor, youth committee, parents) influences our approach to the students with which God entrusts us. With "eyes closed and no one looking around", we make an evangelistic push at the end of each youth service hoping a student will raise his or her hand. Little time is left for follow-up, and we end up praying and hoping our new Christian students somehow understand the reality of the new relationship they have begun with God. Unfortunately, we all know that many of these students never grow and develop in their faith. We have spent far too much time expecting upscale department store faith to grow from dollar store decisions. We need to secure our pastor's and church's support as we work to develop a long-term comprehensive plan to both lead a student to Christ and to disciple that student to maturity in Christ.

Secondly, the pressure that we feel to produce new converts (and thus be "successful" in our ministry) leads to questionable methods of evangelism. Under the gun, we produce ministries filled with the programs of man rather than the power of God. We think that we can present the truth of the gospel to students in ten minutes at a big rally or in one of our services, convince them to pray a contrived pre-written prayer and congratulate them on their decision. We follow up (if we follow up at all) by giving them a *Survival Kit for Youth*, and having them walk the aisle on Sunday morning to announce

their decision to the church. We introduce them to our leadership as “having prayed *the* prayer” and everyone slaps our back for the fine job we’re doing. Yet, Jesus called us to “make disciples” not find people who are willing to pray prayers with us. (Understand, I am not attacking the idea of the “sinner’s prayer”, but rather the recklessness with which we use it.) Many of the students we supposedly convert know virtually nothing about the scriptures or the gospel message before or after we share with them. Most of what the average American student knows about the Bible is a combination of Shakespeare, Harry Potter, and childhood VBS lessons. Students must be allowed to investigate the claims of Christ and to evaluate their own lives in light of the gospel message. Through this process, the conviction of the Holy Spirit can come upon a student and he or she will “call upon the Lord” for salvation whether we lead them in a specific prayer or not. For most students, this takes time—weeks, months, and even sometimes years. In our haste to get a student saved, we eliminate the power of God in the process; and when the power of God is not involved, true conversion does not occur.

Lastly, the gospel we present has been cheapened of its power because we have eliminated the need for Godly sorrow and repentance from our message. At times, it seems that we are so eager to see a student come to Christ, we are willing to ignore obvious sin that must be dealt with in the process. When students are not convicted of their need of forgiveness through the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ, what are they really committing to? A ticket to heaven? An escape from hell? I believe for many students, they are not even sure what they have committed to when we congratulate them of their decision. In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul writes that he feels “regret” that he may have caused the Corinthians to feel sorrow because of his last letter, but this regret was changed to happiness when this sorrow leads to repentance. In verse 7, Paul writes, “*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*” Most often our presentation of the gospel requires nothing more from the students than a short prayer or a name signed on a dotted line. If we do not lead our students to see their desperate need for Christ and His cleansing in their lives, how can we say that they have had a salvation experience? They must come to a realization that Christ died specifically to release them from the penalty of their sin and to give them new life overflowing and abundant in Him. The bottom line is: where there is no conviction, there is no conversion. Again, this takes time!!!!

What are we to do about this? First, we must reevaluate our approach and attitude to evangelism. As ministers, we must refuse to bow to the “pressure” and recommit to seeing teenagers experience a life-changing encounter with a living God that revolutionizes them for a lifetime. We must be re-energized by the idea that God really can and will change the lives of our students when we allow Him to do it *His* way in *His* timing. We need to view our students as individuals in need of God’s saving grace, not as a group that needs to be conquered for Christ. Take time to ponder the reasons that Jesus died for us. Did He simply die for us so that we can escape hell, or did He die that we might have abundant life both here and in the hereafter? Furthermore, commit to helping your students develop that abundant life through mentoring and discipling. Work with your leadership team to develop a specific follow-up plan that helps to assimilate new Christian students into the fellowship of your ministry. Train older students and adults to serve as mentors to these students to help guide them in the steps of their new faith. If we

want our students to make decisions that last a lifetime, we need to be ready to develop these students to serve for a lifetime in the body of Christ.

Secondly, develop a more comprehensive and creative strategy for presenting the gospel to your students. Research the true Biblical perspective of salvation so that you can confidently share this truth with your students. Remember, you can't effectively share what you don't know. Don't assume that just because you grew up in church or you are a minister, you are an expert on the Bible. Commit to spend six months or a year studying the plan and process of redemption in the scriptures. Also, purposely resolve to break out of preconceived molds and methods that your students have heard too many times. Don't ever change the message, but be willing to experiment with different methods and approaches. Ask other youth pastors what methods have brought about life-changing decisions in their ministries. Over the years, I have used dramas, videos, sermons, testimonies, presentations, stories and much more all in an effort to present the same truth from different perspectives to my students. Develop a systematic plan to present the gospel in different ways throughout the year. Don't be surprised if new students need to hear the gospel presented several times before they understand and desire to talk to you about it.

Finally, be patient. Learn to have faith that God will do what He has promised. In Isaiah 55:11, God promises that His word will never return void. In John 12:32, Jesus says, *"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."* It may not happen the way we expect it to, or when we expect it to, but if we are faithful to communicate the gospel in all of its power, He will be faithful to draw our students to Himself. In John 6:44, Jesus specifically states, *"No one comes to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him..."* Respect your students enough to give them the time they need to make such a significant spiritual decisions as these. It has been my experience that when you allow a student to fully examine the claims of the gospel, they will take your request more seriously. When we allow the Holy Spirit to have time to work in a student's life, God will work miracles we can't reproduce.

So when will students make spiritual decisions that last for a lifetime? When our students sense that we love them and sincerely desire to see them fully become the person God created them to be. When we accurately communicate the truth of the gospel in all of its power. When we allow students time to investigate the value of what we are encouraging them to do, and when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in their lives and convict them of their need for repentance and salvation. So the next time you walk into your yearly evaluation, resolve to lead your ministry in a way that you are prepared for the ultimate evaluation. The souls of your students are too valuable for you to do otherwise.

## Chapter 7

### Helping Students Make Spiritual Decisions-Part 2

In chapter 6, we explored three factors which cause our students to make spiritual decisions that they later deny or dismiss. These factors include: bowing to the pressure to be “successful”, using questionable methods of evangelism, and eliminating the need for Godly sorrow and repentance from our Gospel presentation. These factors have contributed to large numbers of students graduating from their “faith” as they graduate from high school.

What are we to do about this? First, must reevaluate our approach and attitude to evangelism. As ministers, we must refuse to bow to the “pressure” and recommit to seeing teenagers experience a life-changing encounter with a living God that revolutionizes them for a lifetime. We must be re-energized by the idea that God really can and will change the lives of our students when we allow Him to do it *His* way in *His* timing. We need to view our students as individuals in need of God’s saving grace, not as a group that needs to be conquered for Christ. Take time to ponder the reasons that Jesus died for us. Did He simply die for us so that we can escape hell, or did He die that we might have abundant life both here and in the hereafter? Furthermore, commit to help your students develop that abundant life through mentoring and discipling. Work with your leadership team to develop a specific follow-up plan that helps to assimilate new Christian students into the fellowship of your ministry. Train older students and adults to serve as mentors to these students to help guide them in the steps of their new faith. If we want our students to make decisions that last a lifetime, we need to be ready to develop these students to serve for a lifetime in the body of Christ.

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So when will students make spiritual decisions that last for a lifetime? When our students sense that we love them and sincerely desire to see them fully become the person God created them to be. When we accurately communicate the truth of the gospel in all of its power. When we allow students time to investigate the value of what we are encouraging them to do, and when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in their lives and convict them of their need for repentance and salvation. So the next time you walk into your yearly evaluation, resolve to lead your ministry in a way that you are prepared for the ultimate evaluation. The souls of your students are too valuable for you to do otherwise.



## **Chapter 8**

### **Learning to Effectively Communicate with Teenagers**

A few years ago, my wife and I saved up and upgraded our home computer. We were most excited about being able to purchase a brand new 3 in 1 printer/scanner/copier that would allow us to do so much more of our work at home. This printer is so sophisticated, it actually talks to you!!! Unfortunately, from the very first week, this new printer has been a major headache. The phrase it most loves to repeat is “problem communicating with the printer”. As I have learned from experience, resolving this communication problem is no small or easy task.

For many of us, each week we are hearing a similar error message each time we interact with our students. “Problem communicating with the teenager” is what we hear in our hearts as our glassy-eyed students stare through us as they seemingly endure our weekly attempts at conversation. Over the past few years, I have noticed that there have been a number of books and articles written by youth pastors who have become frustrated with attempting to communicate with teenagers. Teenagers can be intimidating. Teens have created their own subculture in our world that seems so foreign to many of us. This is a generation of teenagers who have lost respect and trust for authority figures. These students have watched presidents lie, experienced 9/11 as children, and live daily with the threat of school violence and terrorism.

When it comes to talking with teenagers, many adults don’t even know where to start, some even with their own children. Even though I have been working in youth ministry for over 15 years, I still get a little nervous every time I enter a high school cafeteria. Even so, there are three important keys I have learned over the years about communicating with teenagers.

#### **1. Be Human, not Superhuman**

With the invention of the internet, we actually made it possible for teenagers to be in constant communication with others without being truly connected to anyone. To complicate this, many teens live in broken or dysfunctional homes and have very little interaction with their parents. As such, the average teenager is in desperate need of genuine relationship with a real-life adult. At times, we may think that we need to be perfect role models for teenagers, but the truth is we know that we are not. Teens are hungry for adults who will admit when they are hurting, who sometimes have doubts about God and the Scriptures, and who sometimes make big mistakes. While we can’t always offer them the perfect life, we can offer the example of a passionate heart for God. It is important that teenagers understand that we are not “experts” on God—we are on the same journey they are on, just a little further along.

#### **2. Tell your stories.**

Over the years, I made an honest attempt to keep up with youth culture by listening to the radio, watching TV shows and movies, and reading different magazines. I have finally just given up. Teenage culture is like shifting sand, and it is impossible to really get a handle on it before it changes itself again. Keeping up with what star is in rehab

and what the new dumb movie (remember Napoleon Dynamite?) is the craze is honestly mind-numbing. While, it is important for us to be up on the culture our teens navigate, I honestly think the whole idea is over-emphasized in youth work. I have found that what teenagers really want is for me to be me. If you have ever sat with a group of teenagers for very long, they spend the whole time telling “remember when” stories or stories about events at school. As you develop a relationship with a teenager, tell the stories of your life. Stories of how you fell in love, how you got your first car, how God came through for you will connect with teenagers far more than spiked hair and overpriced t-shirts ever will.

### **3. Share Your Life and Faith**

For most teenagers, the Bible is a mysterious book that is difficult to understand, and often doesn't seem to relate to everyday living. When we invite teenagers into our lives, we have the unique opportunity of helping faith and the Bible come alive for them. As they watch us make choices based on Biblical principles, faithfully love our spouse, and raise our children in a Christ-centered home, they will begin to see the value in living a life committed to honoring God. Be bold in sharing how God is working in your life and the life of your family. You easily could be the only spiritual influence in the life of a teenager. Don't waste the opportunity to give God the glory for the great blessings of your life. Teenagers have mastered the art of seeming to be uninterested while secretly paying close attention. Never get discouraged, God has been using adults to communicate with and mentor teenagers for thousands of years. He will help you make a lasting impact in the lives of teenagers.

In a world where many children are raising themselves, we must be passionately committed to find ways to connect with teenagers. The stakes are high, and young lives are adrift without direction. May we be willing to work past all of our apprehension and fear to be a voice of truth and love for a generation in need!

Now if I could just get this printer to work...

## **Chapter 9**

### **Recruiting Adult Leaders in Your Ministry**

Each new school year, youth pastors are looking for some strong and committed adult leaders to help lead their ministries. Why do we need these adults so badly? Here are three reasons...

**1. To reach as many as possible.** Youth pastors are a strange lot. We have an amazing tolerance for the worst forms of pizza, hard rock music, discount sodas, and bad hair styles. Even though all of our unique and interesting personality defects may attract teenagers to us and our ministries, it is far more likely that our students will have more in common with other adult volunteers within our ministries. We need to surround ourselves with the most diverse group of Godly adults that we can find, so that we can effectively reach all the different breeds of “teenager”. It is also far more likely that the adults in your church will be there for the youth years after you have gone.

**2. To ensure maximum impact.** When Jesus lived on the earth, He did not make it His personal mission to personally meet and minister to every single person living at that time. Instead, He recruited a group of twelve men and personally mentored and trained them to join in that work with Him. I believe that Jesus used this model, not because He was incapable of ministering to every person, but because He knew that the people He created were incapable of reaching large groups of people relationally. If we are going to reach every student that God brings into our ministries, we need an army of adults who are willing to invest in the lives of the youth on a personal level.

**3. To take the pressure off of us.** How many times have we planned something on our own, did all of the prep work ourselves, and the event just fell flat? Then we hear the adults say, “If he had just asked us we could have told him that it wouldn’t work!!” One day after I had endured another poorly attended event, I decided to do just that—ask the adults. I put together a team of adults who could help me organize and plan the events for the next quarter. They were excited to help and were very enthusiastic in their proposals. After a few events, the adults and parents became much more sympathetic to the challenges of motivating youth to do just about anything. We bonded as a team who won and lost as a team.

Once your team is assembled and ready for ministry, help them catch the vision and excitement of helping youth become fully-devoted and fully-developed followers of Jesus Christ!!!

## **Chapter 10**

### **Developing Adult Leadership in Your Ministry**

It's five o'clock on a Wednesday and pouring down rain outside. You have the equivalent of four trips worth of "stuff" you have to carry over to the youth activities center. You have procrastinated and now you are in panic mode trying to get ready on time for your midweek youth worship service or Bible study. Your frustration level is through the roof. When you finally make it over to the activities center, you realize that you have forgotten half of what you meant to bring. You give some quick directions to a few youth who aren't listening and run back through the rain to your office. When you finally stand before your youth, you are sweaty, exhausted, unfocused, and angry because you have no one to help you work with your youth. The service stumbles along and you end up looking unorganized, unprofessional, and unprepared to the adults who stand along the back wall. You leave frustrated because all of those adults and youth parents just stand and watch your ship sink in the storm of your growing ministry.

Does this sound familiar to you? If it does, then there are two possibilities in your particular context. First, you genuinely have no one to help you, and you have good reason to be frustrated. Probably all of us have been there before and we can share your anger and frustration. Second, and probably more likely, you have not developed the adult leadership potential that does exist in your ministry. The adults who stand along the back wall have become frustrated with your leadership because you seem unwilling to take the time to help them discover and develop their particular ministries with youth. This article will focus on discovering reasons why youth pastors don't develop the adult leadership that currently exists in our ministries, reasons why we desperately need to begin to do so, and some steps to get started building an adult leadership team.

### **5 reasons youth pastors don't develop adult leadership in their ministries:**

**1. Laziness.** First and foremost, some youth pastors are just plain lazy. Many of us work with pastors or administrators who are only interested in our ministries when something is going wrong. The rest of the time, they pay little attention to what we do with our ministries. The expectations are low, and the results reflect this attitude. This is a dangerous place to be if you struggle with motivation. Full-time ministry in this setting simply lends itself to lazy people finding more ways to be lazy. It would take far too much time and effort to develop adult leaders.

**2. Fear and Insecurity.** Many youth ministers are closer in age to the youth in the church than the adults. In the past, I found it difficult at 23 years old to tell a 42 year old parent what I think he or she needs to do in my ministry. I always felt like the parents viewed me as a grown-up "kid" whom they had hired to entertain their teenagers. As a result, I lacked the confidence to really attempt to develop the adult leaders and focused my attention on the students instead. It wasn't until I reached my thirties that I felt really comfortable approaching adult leaders to serve in our ministry.

**3. Arrogance.** Some youth pastors struggle with relinquishing control in their ministry because they have what I call the "superman" complex. A youth pastor with this complex truly believes that no one else could lead the student ministry as effectively as he or she does. In his or her mind, most adults are not "cool" enough to really connect with the

average postmodern teenager, he or she and relegates them to mostly grunt work if he or she uses them at all. Adult workers are few because there is not enough room in the ministry for many leaders other than the youth pastor and his or her ego.

**4. Incompetence.** For whatever reason, some youth pastors are incapable of developing adult leadership. They are far too unorganized and unprofessional to actually have a “plan” or strategy for recruiting and developing adult leaders. The adult workers they do have quickly tire of last minute cancellations or requests and hide from them just before events. It is impossible to utilize adults if you have no idea of what you plan to do until five minutes before you start. If this is you, keep reading---there is hope!!!

**5. Inexperience or Ignorance.** Far too prevalent are the youth pastors who have not been trained or mentored on how to develop leadership in their ministries of any form. They are in need of professional training and development in their own lives before they can effectively develop a strategy for their ministries. Unfortunately, most youth pastors are part-time or volunteer and most of this training is simply not available to them.

If you can see some of your tendencies in any of these, consider the following reasons to make some changes in your habits and attitudes.

#### **4 reasons why we desperately need to develop the adult leadership in our ministries:**

**1. Adults are people too!!!** Not only has God entrusted us with the lives of our youth, He has also given us a great team of adults who have many of the same needs their teenage children have. They are also “God’s workmanship” (Ephesians 2:10), and God created them to serve and build up the body of Christ. It is our God-given responsibility to help the adult volunteers in our ministries discover and develop their unique ministries in our church. Ephesians 4:11-12 states, “It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to *prepare* God's people for works of service...” (emphasis mine). This passage specifically states that one of our primary roles as pastors of our youth ministries is to equip God’s people to fulfill a ministry within the body of Christ. Our churches may have called us to work specifically with youth, but God has called us to equip all the people that we influence with our ministries. This call includes the adults in our ministries as well as the youth.

**2. Youth Pastors are unusual people.** Let’s face it, youth pastors are a strange lot. We spend most of our waking life with that alien life form called “teenager”. Some of us are more adventurous and we dare to make contact with an even more bizarre species called “middle schooler”. We have an amazing tolerance for the worst forms of pizza, hard rock music, discount sodas, and bad hair styles. We can go an entire week on only two hours of sleep a night, and we actually watch SpongeBob because we think he is funny. Even though all of our unique and interesting personality defects may attract teenagers to us and our ministries, it is unlikely that our teenagers are actually very much like us. In fact, it is far more likely that the students will have more in common with other adult volunteers within our ministries. We need to surround ourselves with the most diverse group of Godly adults that we can find, so that we can effectively reach all the different breeds of “teenager”. In fact, it is far more likely that the adults in your church will be

there for the youth years after you have gone. We need to connect the youth with these adults to ensure that the ministry can continue if we transition to a new ministry.

**3. To ensure maximum impact.** When Jesus lived on the earth, He did not make it His personal mission to personally meet and minister to every single person living at that time. Instead, He recruited a group of twelve men and personally mentored and trained them to join in that work with Him. He spent three years pouring His life into theirs, and my writing of this article is proof that His efforts were very effective. I believe that Jesus used this model, not because He was incapable of ministering to every person, but because He knew that the people He created were incapable of reaching large groups of people relationally. This model works in youth ministry as well. If a ministry is very small (5-10 youth), it is possible (though unlikely) that a youth pastor could mentor and disciple each student. As the numbers get larger, more adult leaders will be needed to personally reach each student in the ministry. If Jesus could personally disciple twelve men, then each youth pastor and adult leader could probably disciple four to eight students. So, for a ministry of fifty students, a youth pastor would need at least seven or eight adult volunteers to have a good chance of reaching every student personally. Add in personality differences, common interests, and maturity issues and that number continues to rise. If we are going to reach every student that God brings into our ministries, we need an army of adults who are willing to invest in the lives of the youth on a personal level.

**4. To take the pressure off of us.** How many times have we planned something on our own, did all of the prep work ourselves, and the event just fell flat? Then we hear the adults say, "If he had just asked us we could have told him that it wouldn't work!!" One day after I had endured another poorly attended event, I decided to do just that—ask the adults. I put together a team of adults who could help me organize and plan the events for the next quarter. They were excited to help and were very enthusiastic in their proposals. When the first event came, we had a great crowd because each adult made sure that his or her teenager was there with friends. Everything was well-organized because we had split up all of the responsibilities, and I actually had time to talk with the students without worrying about the rest of the details. Not all of the events worked as well, but there was a different attitude about our failure. It was no longer my fault, but the team's fault. The adults and parents became much more sympathetic to the challenges of motivating youth to do just about anything. This development relieved a great deal of stress from my life. The success or failure of our ministry no longer depended solely on me.

If you are now convinced that you need to begin to develop your adult leadership, consider the following suggestions to help you get started.

**Some steps to begin to develop an adult leadership team.**

1. **Do some research.** A good deal of information exists on developing leadership in both the secular and Christian markets. Make it your 2004 project to read different books and articles on leadership development. Network with other youth pastors to find out what is currently working for them.
2. **Find a mentor and ask for accountability.** You may be in a church situation where you have a supervisor who is very involved in the development of your

- ministry. Share with this person your desire to develop an adult leadership team. Work with this person to develop a vision for this team. If you don't have a supervisor, then find an older experienced mentor to help you get started.
3. **Start with communication.** In too many churches, we beg people to work in our ministries. We need to work hard to make our ministries a place where people want to work. This starts with good planning and communication. One tried and true rule is that adults cannot help you with events and projects that they don't know about. Create an email loop where you send out student ministry news once a week. Really pump up your coming events and programs and you will be surprised at how many adults will write back to see if you need any help. When they do, add them to your list of possible recruits for your team.
  4. **Develop a real strategy to recruit and develop leaders.** It is crucial that you develop a strategy for recruiting adult leaders. People are always more excited about joining a ministry that is organized and professional. Having a person just come and "help out" rarely results in finding a long-term leader. Develop application forms (include a criminal background check!) and interview each person who is interested in working in your ministry. Get to know them personally and try to place them in a place that best fits their interests and abilities. Organize yearly training events for your team to develop their skills in working with youth. Be available to help them assimilate into your ministry.

Once your team is assembled and ready for ministry, let them do it!!! Too many of us have a tendency to micro-manage our adult leaders. They may stumble and make some mistakes, but that is all part of growing and learning. Just be there to help them back up and encourage them in their ministry. Help them to catch the vision and excitement of helping youth become fully-devoted and fully-developed followers of Jesus Christ!!!

## **Chapter 11**

### **Working with Difficult Parents**

After serving for the past decade in full-time youth ministry, I have come to one very important conclusion: parents can make or break your ministry. As such, many books and articles have been written about how to develop a vibrant ministry with the parents associated with the teenagers in your ministry. But what about the parents who *never* come to church with their teenagers? You know the ones I'm talking about: they love to send their teenagers to you for two hours a week to have you teach them morals and values, but they themselves have no interest in your church and are apathetic towards God at best. And what about those parents within the church who turn on you and crusade to have you fired or at least work hard to diminish your effectiveness? How do you deal with them and keep your excitement and passion for ministry? This article will help us deal with these "other" parents—these who don't care what you do and those who openly oppose you and work against you. We will deal with each of these separately.

The first time I met Tom, he was standing in the back of one of our youth Bible studies. He and his son Mike had argued on the way to church and somehow my name had been brought up. After dropping Mike off and driving around for a few minutes, Tom decided to come see what we were doing and have a word with me. He simply walked in to our study and motioned for me to come talk with him. I told the students to take a break and spent the next half hour listening to his side of the argument (an argument which of course I knew nothing about!!!) This is one of only a handful of times this father entered our church building during my three year ministry. I can't recall any of what he said, but I do recall wondering why it is so hard to get some parents to come to church with their teenagers. In that particular church, over half of my students came by themselves or were simply dropped off by their parents. Some churches prefer the youth pastor to focus on those parents who are faithful attendees (and who tithe). These "other" parents are viewed with suspicion. But shouldn't we reach out to these "other" parents? I am strongly convicted that we should. Let me offer five practical suggestions I have learned over the years:

1. **Be aggressive!!!** Communicate, communicate, and then communicate some more!!!! Make sure you send an annoying amount of flyers, calendars, postcards, and emails to these parents. Address everything "To the parents of..." so that they will sense that you truly desire to involve their entire family in your ministry. Have a parent luncheon at least once a year (with great free food) where you detail your philosophy and plan for the next year. Have required parent meetings for all of your trips where you provide the forms they left at home and a notary for their convenience. Stand in the parking lot where the students are picked up—don't let any new parent get away without at least introducing yourself to them. Be aggressive in your communication with these parents because everyone else in their lives is aggressive as well.
2. **Be professional!!!** When you mail out flyers and calendars, make sure they are well done and all of the information is complete and correct. Your correspondence should be superior to that of the PTA or the little-league baseball coach. Be early for all of your events and trips so that these parents don't consistently wait in the



parking lot for you to show up. Try with all of your might to return on time or early from all of your trips. Speak to them when you call their teenager at home. Earn their respect by running your ministry with a professional touch.

3. **Be creative!!!** Think of creative ways to involve these parents in your ministry. For instance, you may have a student whose father is an avid camper. Ask that father to help you plan and organize your next camping trip. Or ask that mother to come and help you prepare your next calendar mail-out. Don't pressure them to attend your church, just ask for their help and spend time with them. Once I planned a weekend retreat that dealt with family issues. For this retreat, we asked each parent to write his or her student a "love" letter which we gave to the students on the final evening. During the weeks prior to this retreat, I met parents and step parents who I didn't even know existed. Sometimes stepping "out of the box" and trying new ideas can have unexpected benefits.
4. **Be friends!!!** That's right, I am suggesting that you become casual friends with these "other" parents. Sit with them at the local football game, call them for suggestions or advice about their teenager, and talk sports in the parking lot. Don't ask them for money, and don't drop by unannounced. Rejoice with them in their teenager's successes and weep with them in their failures. You may be the only positive influence in the life of a parent!!! Don't waste the opportunity.
5. **Be prepared!!!** Experience has taught me that not every church parent or pastor will appreciate your outreach to these "other" parents. There are those who believe that church families should be favored over those who occasionally attend or who never attend. Cover yourself by being wise about how you involve these "other" parents in your ministry. Work with your pastor or supervisor to determine appropriate levels of involvement. Some people avoid church for a reason. Others just might need to be encouraged. Take your time and pray for God's leadership and discernment.

These are just a few suggestions for reaching these parents. Success in this area may be difficult to measure. Don't give up!!! You will never reach these parents if you don't try. Your extra efforts to forge relationships with these parents may be the catalyst to, one day, bring their whole family into the church.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the second category of "other" parents-- those parents who work against you.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Working with Parents who Work against You**

One evening after church, a parent approached me about allowing a certain student to attend the upcoming winter retreat. Our ministry had experienced some very rough times and we had purposely planned a retreat for our “church” students to get away and refocus. This parent wanted a student who was a “known drug dealer” and a problem to our ministry to attend this retreat. I politely explained the purpose of the retreat and told him about an upcoming ministry event that would be better suited for this student. As I attempted to walk away, he stepped into my path; he blocked my every move and then chest bumped me. Before I knew it, he had me pinned against the wall of our church foyer and some of our “problem” students were running to come help him. I wrestled myself from his grasp and exited the building as he followed me spewing threats. As I stumbled to my car, he stood on the church porch yelling lies for all to hear. After driving away, I stopped my car and numbly sat in disbelief as I tried to regain my composure before I faced my wife at home. It had all happened so fast. I retraced the conversation and events and tried to make sense of it all. I couldn’t. I probably never will.

Over the years, I have faced a number of similar situations that have always made me wonder what I’m doing working with students (and their parents!!!) But through it all, I have somehow kept perspective enough to continue to come to work each day. And now five years later, I am still working with students. I have to imagine that if you have been in ministry long enough, you have experienced a few of your church parents “hating on” you from time to time. They criticize your ministry first and then your personality second. They question if you were ever the “right person” for this job. They listen to and encourage the teenagers to become disillusioned with your leadership. They hold exclusive meetings during which they discuss your job security and delineate your faults and failures. Chances are, if you haven’t already experienced this notorious ministry phenomenon, then your day is coming. Let me share seven principles I have learned that have helped me survive over the last ten years.

1. ***Be Cautious!!!!*** Those parents who are there to help you unload the moving truck may be the same ones who force you to reload it. Be wary of parents who support you too quickly. I always gravitate towards the parents who take their time to get to know me. Remember, some parents who support you first, will wound you the worst. Also, listen for parents who openly criticize the past youth pastor-you may be next.
2. ***Be Realistic.*** Jesus never promised us that ministry would be easy. In fact, he warned us all that we would be hated for our association with Him, and that many of us would face trials and tribulations on account of His name. With the large number of lost or spiritually immature people within the church, we should expect to face some opposition and to experience conflict at times in our ministry. It’s all part of the package.
3. ***Be Comforted!!!!*** Through my hardest times, I have found great comfort in the lives of the men in the Old Testament. I spent an entire year in “exile” with Moses in Midian; I sat a season under the shade tree with Elijah; and I have sunken into the pit with Jeremiah. I hurt with them, I cried with them,

and most of all, I identified with them. I was encouraged that I was counted worthy to suffer for the cause of God like these men did. In all, my greatest times of healing came from extended times spent in Bible study and prayer. Remember, the Holy Spirit is The Comforter—run to Him for your healing.

4. ***Be Honest!!!*** Sometimes parents get upset with us for legitimate reasons. Generally speaking, we youth ministers can be moody, disorganized, emotional, stressed-out individuals who suffer from sleep deprivation and who rarely get the respect we deserve. We can become overwhelmed with pressures that come at us from every direction, and we can lose perspective. Consequently, we can be insensitive to students, we can “drop the ball” at times, and we can make poor decisions. Many youth parents understand this – THEY LIVE WITH TEENAGERS! Often times we can defuse a potential conflict with parents by simply being honest with them, by admitting our mistakes, and by asking for forgiveness.
5. ***Be Prepared!!!*** Keep track of everything!!!! Physically keep records of your work schedule, the extracurricular activities you attend, the number of contacts you make, and especially the confrontations you have with students. Take note of when you think, “That didn’t go so well!!” Write down a short account and keep it in your files. Apprise your pastor of the situation *before* the parent does!!! The last thing a pastor likes is to be blindsided by one of your problems. All of this may seem to be extreme, but you may never know when you can disarm a meeting by producing written documentation of your personal ministry.
6. ***Be Strong in the Lord!!!*** Some of the criticism we receive is warranted, but some is not. Some of it comes from unstable people who are looking for someone on whom to take out their frustrations. Realize that the Lord “hired” you into His ministry, and only He can “fire” you from it. You may have a church ask you to leave, but they can never fire you from the ministry into which the Lord has called you. I have heard it said that a minister is not worth his salt if he hasn’t been fired at least once. (Don’t go and try to get fired, it’s just an expression!!!) When faced with a difficult situation, keep yourself strong in the Lord and let Him be your encouragement.
7. ***Be humble!!!*** When attacked, our natural tendency is to attempt to defend ourselves. We are tempted to say, “Look what I’ve done!” or “This ministry wouldn’t exist without me!” Don’t. Let the Lord defend you. The reality is that you have done nothing more than the Lord allowed you to do under His leadership, and that God could use a rock or tree to do your ministry if He desired. Acknowledge this incredible privilege you have to partner with God in HIS work. Give him all the credit and honor for any success you may be experiencing. He likes it that way.

So whether you have been hurt by parents before, are hurting now, or your time is yet to come, take comfort in God's Word and the testimony of those who have gone before us. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:41). Let us continue to be "counted worthy" to do His work boldly day after day after day after day...

#### **Part 4-Caring for Your Own Heart**

## **Chapter 13**

### **Juggling Life, Family, and Ministry**

Finally, it was three o'clock. As the last bell rang for the day, I packed up and walked quickly to the car with my mind racing with all that I needed to do in the next three hours. First, drive to another high school to pick up several students, then hit the grocery store, then off to the church to get set up for the evening youth program. Hopefully, my wife will get off work in time to help me lead the program that evening. My stress level is through the roof. Teaching high school, working part-time in youth ministry, and being a good husband and father was proving to be quite a challenge. I really just hoped to make it through the night without any major problems.

This scenario is played out every week at churches around the nation. Full-time, part-time, and volunteer youth workers all struggle to juggle the demands of balancing life, family, and ministry. Although it has been over ten years since I last taught high school, it has not proven much easier for me to find balance in all the important areas of my life while working full-time in church ministry rather than part-time. Yet, over the years, my wife and I have found some ways to make it work. Let's consider four of these here.

#### **1. Don't try to compartmentalize your life.**

Many youth workers try to divide the different competing aspects of their life into neat separate manageable categories. Like a neatly organized closet, they try desperately to keep their ministry life separate from their family life while trying to keep from bringing work home from the office. For me, this has never worked. Working in ministry at any level is a much more a calling than a career choice. If you have embraced this calling in your own life, it is deeply part of who you are. After twenty years of working in ministry, I would describe the balance of my life much more like a big salad with all the best ingredients mixed together. My life as a husband and father, a youth pastor, a college professor, and a writer cannot be separated. It is what it is...one big fun chaotic journey of scheduled insanity.

#### **2. Secure "buy in" from your family.**

Nothing can bring conflict more quickly than having part of your family opposed to you working in ministry. I believe that if God wants you to serve in ministry, He will inform your spouse as well. When I asked my wife to marry me almost twenty years ago, I specifically asked her if she was willing to be a pastor's wife. Luckily for me she said yes. Yet, I have two friends who were called into ministry after marriage and took their spouse on a roller coaster ride of seminary poverty, moving around from church to church, and unsuspected conflict and criticism. In both cases, the spouse eventually left the marriage saying, "I didn't sign up for this!"

These are tragedies that could have been avoided. In many cases, people who feel "called" to ministry are already serving powerfully in their own ministry context. Making the decision to uproot your wife and children for the challenging journey of

ministry is one that should be made with much prayer and many advisors. I often tell young college students who claim to be called into ministry, “Try to do anything else, if you can and be content, you should not pursue ministry. If you can’t, proceed with caution.” You will never be able to balance the demands of ministry and family if you don’t have complete buy in from the people who matter most in your life.

### **3. Protect your time with your family.**

As the husband of my best friend and the father of six children, ages eleven to newborn, family is a very important part of my life. With my schedule, I could easily be away from my home most nights each month. Committee meetings, football and basketball games, outreach events, plays, practices, campus ministry meetings and much more compete for my available time each week. Yet, I have made a commitment to be home to tuck my children into bed as many nights as possible each week. When I accepted my current position, I made this clear from the very beginning-my own wife and children were my most important priority. As a result, I often miss seemingly important games and events that my youth are involved in each month. I would rather ask for forgiveness from the parents in my ministry than from my wife and children later.

In order to protect my time with my own family, I have worked very hard to develop a strong team of workers who support me in ministry. When I am unable to attend an event or game, I try to have another leader there representing our ministry and supporting that student. This has relieved the pressure on me and has empowered some of our other leaders to take more ownership in our ministry. As a result, I am not viewed as the only person who can make an impact with our students.

### **4. Include your family as much as possible.**

As much as I can, I bring part of all of my family to as many events as possible. We load them all up in our 12 passenger van and invade whatever event is going on that weekend. It is not unusual to see my children sitting in the laps of our youth or dancing and playing games in the middle of an event. When we can find childcare (are you available?), my wife will go with me on weekend retreats and conferences.

This has helped our youth and their parents view me as more than the “youth guy” they pay to hang out with their kids. They have learned that to love me means loving my family as well. I have found this also really helps when I do have to leave my kids at home because they know what I will be doing and who I will be spending time with that week. My prayer is that by involving them and making them part of my ministry life now, they will not resent my ministry responsibilities in the years to come. So far, so good.

If your life is like mine, you probably barely had time to even read this article. Yet, like me, you have a desire to bring better balance into your life. I have shared some ideas I have learned from my years in ministry that has helped my family. Yet even as I write this, my wife just called to let me listen to our two year old son have a complete meltdown while stripping naked in his bed. I have to go. I have some juggling to do.

**Chapter 14**  
**How to Avoid Getting Fired (or Forced Out)**

In 2003, we all watched with interest as the University of Nebraska announced the firing of head football coach, Frank Solich. What made this firing remarkable was that he had just completed a 9-3 season in the Big 12 conference, a successful season in almost anyone's mind. As the press conference continued, Nebraska's athletic director explained that the university had lost confidence that Solich could guide the team back to national prominence. Winning most of the games was not good enough, and nothing short of competing for the national title would be accepted. As I considered how Frank Solich must be feeling, I realized that there are many similarities between coaching and youth ministry. How often do we think we are winning when really, behind the scenes, our churches are "losing confidence" in our ability to take our ministries to the next level? Our programs can be attracting large crowds, and our students can be excited about the ministry, but, all along, our personal choices and behaviors can be destroying our relationship with the pastoral staff, personnel committee, and parents. Some of us are losing our jobs and we don't even know it.

In this chapter, I want to identify four confidence killers which may lead us to pack our boxes in the coming months.

### **1. Unprofessional Behavior.**

Youth pastors are notorious for behaving like children while expecting to draw an adult paycheck. We expect to be able to come into the office at ten every morning (while the rest of our church members are at work by 8am) in shorts and a camp t-shirt or basketball jersey with our hat on backwards. We haven't shaved since last Sunday morning, and we'll shower later. We justify this because we had a late night hanging out with the youth at the Burger Bell the night before. We arrive ten minutes late to staff meeting because we are micro-waving our pizza pockets, and we show up with a scrap of paper (or napkin) asking to borrow something with which to write. We forgot about that report that was due, and we left the van keys (which the senior adults need) at home on the dresser. We have an incredible rapport with the teenagers, but the adults of the church refer to us as "the kid" or the "youth guy". We haven't even thought about youth message for this week, let alone plan for the future. Organizationally, our ministry is day to day and we "drop the ball" more than we catch it. But hey, the teenagers love us and that is all that matters. Right? Unfortunately, no. The youth don't pay our salary; the parents and other church leaders do. These leaders are wondering if our "chaos-theory" ministry can disciple and equip their students for long-term ministry. We grow angry when our methods are questioned, and our leaders begin to wonder if we actually know or care about what we are doing.

### **2. Administrative blunders.**

I have often told other youth pastors that even if your ministry is going well, there is 10% of your ministry work that can still get you fired. The majority (90%) of your ministry work deals directly with your ministry with families and students; the other 10% is the behind-the-scenes, paperwork-oriented administrative details that few people ever see or know about. Blowing off this 10% can hurt you dearly in the long run. Returning the van trashed, out of fuel, and parked in the wrong parking place; spending money without authorization and mishandling your budget; coming late to or



missing staff meetings altogether; repeatedly returning late from events with the students; poor or non-existent planning; repeatedly asking for forgiveness instead of permission; and being irresponsible or unorganized in general can all hurt your confidence rating with the people in the church who matter the most. This list could go on and on, but the basic point is that we need to learn to take care of the little details to make sure we have the opportunity to continue to do what we love the most.

### **3. “Bad” Conflict**

Conflict is a necessary challenge for all ministry situations. It can be very healthy at times, and it can help us avoid major issues later in our ministry. However, there are some situations we may want to avoid at all costs if we value our ministry. First, arguing with students is a major mistake. Even if we win the battle we will lose the proverbial war. No parent, no matter how difficult his or her student may be, wants to hear that you lowered yourself enough to “have it out” with his or her student. I once argued with the associate pastor’s daughter in front of a number of other students. She was being disrespectful and rude, and I felt justified to call her on her behavior. I thought that I could make an “example” of her and help build my respect with the students. All I got was an early meeting the next day with the associate pastor (who happened to also be my supervisor). He wanted to know if I handled all conflict in the same manner-and my confidence rating slipped a few more points. Secondly, arguing with parents is a death wish. Though I would say that you have to take your stand with some parents, I would also guarantee that you better have your ministry in order before you do. Parents talk to parents who talk to other parents...you get the point. Parents can effectively end your ministry if you alienate enough of them. (They also can save your ministry if you invest in enough of them!!!)

Thirdly, God placed our supervisors over us for a reason. Arguing with them on a consistent basis can not only destroy our current ministry, but can also affect our long-term career. We must continually keep before us that we are not the visionary leaders of our churches. We will not be held accountable by God for the overall handling of the church ministries, only for our leadership of the youth ministry. We may not always understand why our supervisors think the way that they do, but we must learn to yield to their authority. “YES SIR” could possibly be the two most important words that we ever learn to say in ministry. Oh, and arguing with church secretaries...let’s not even go there.

### **4. Self-Destructing Under Pressure and Change**

Unfortunately, things change in the ministry almost on a daily basis. As the church grows or declines, often our ministries can be severely affected. As pastors, we are under a tremendous amount of stress under normal circumstances, but how do we react when things don’t go as planned? It is easy to deal with the changes that work in our favor, but how do we deal with the changes that could negatively affect our ability to carry out our ministry? How do we handle a monetary cut in our ministry budget? the announcement that we won’t get that raise this year? a slump in attendance and excitement? a change of senior pastor or supervisor? a bad evaluation? negative parent feedback? How we handle the pressures and changes in our life and our ministry can greatly affect the way that our church family views our ministry.

Immature or childish behavior can greatly affect our confidence rating with our congregation. Do you go on a crusade if you think that your youth worship service may be moved from the sanctuary to the broom closet? Do you blow up at the hotel manager when your rooms are not booked correctly? Our poor behavior during these times are rarely forgotten by those who entrust their youth to our care. We need be prepared for anything so that we will be able to react with maturity to adverse conditions in our ministry lives. Our jobs may ultimately depend on it.

There are more confidence killers that could be named, but they all would have the same theme. I believe all of these killers come from a lack of a quality relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Immaturity, laziness, being argumentative, and cracking under pressure are all signs of a person who is spiritually out of balance. As I look back over ten years of ministry, the times that I most demonstrated these behaviors were times when I was most out of fellowship with my Savior. I allowed myself to get so caught up in the excitement of the ministry that I lost sight of the reason for my ministry-to bring glory to Jesus Christ. We need to desire to model our ministry lives after our Savior, and we need to trust that it is He who can guide us in ministry regardless of our circumstances

Obviously, since I am writing this to you, I learned these lessons the hard way. It is my prayer and desire that you take a long hard look at your ministry life and make changes before you make more mistakes than can be forgiven. I recently talked with another youth pastor who challenged me that he would not change any of his “questionable” behavior unless the senior pastor called him in and confronted him. Let me assure you that being called into the senior pastor’s office is your first step on your road to finding another church. Find a mentor in the ministry who can help you develop in these difficult areas. It is always better to hear the hard “stuff” from a friend than from a supervisor. Finally, we need to keep sight that most of our churches really are looking for a youth pastor whose ministry proves to create youth-disciples who love God and serve Him for a lifetime. I know that over the course of my ministry years, seeing this happen in my ministry has become my greatest desire. I never want to be that youth pastor who could never take my ministry to the ultimate level. I never want to be “transitioned” from a church because I just wasn’t the “total package” that the church leadership was looking for. How about you??? Let us strive together to become all that we can for the sake of Jesus Christ. Our churches and our students need us.