

Youth ministry: Development and growth

Take me to your leader

As I begin, let me first make an important observation.

We have found that every successful youth ministry, youth group, or youth endeavor requires a passionate, effective leader or leaders. The title isn't important, except to say that having someone who is respected by the group is critical. To have a successful youth ministry, you will need someone who is committed and engaged and that will not only *lead* but will lead as Christ led. Someone who will lead in *life example* as well as instructional situations and group gatherings.

Assess the needs of youth

Firstly, take time to assess the needs of those you wish to minister to.

It is so easy to overlook this step in the process. Many times, we have already decided what should be done and assume that we know what others are feeling or needing. Often we think that we should just do what everyone else is doing, or organize a youth group in the typical church method. We can make incorrect assumptions and invest time and resources toward activities that may not be meeting the actual needs of youth in our community.

Who exactly are you trying to reach? Who is our target?

Those who are unhappy and unfulfilled in their current church community? The unsaved? The marginal believer who is not active in any youth fellowship? Just who is the typical individual you are trying to reach, and what do they need...what do they desire...what are they looking for in a community (religious or secular) for which to belong?

NOTE: what is the motivation, the "desire" that is drawing people into gangs and into violent anti-government groups such as ISIS?

Assess your current church community's resources

Second, take time to assess your church community's current assets, strengths and weaknesses.

Who are the existing leaders and what can they 'bring to the table' in this ministry endeavor? (IE: Money, talents, materials like buildings and supplies, etc) What facilities, groups, or programs already exist in your church? What underutilized individuals and resources are possibly available for you to recruit?

If you take the time to look, you may find people with similar passions who are already present.

The Lord may be leading you to come alongside and join forces with someone who is already ministering to your target group, but could use your encouragement, partnership and shared resources. Not everyone is supposed to be the lead individual! Be humble!

Community Overview

What are the “boundaries” ...the limits that naturally exist in your “world” that would help draw a map and realistic plan for your ministry potential?

Meaning, in your area/city what are the possible social, cultural, logistical, and religious restrictions that could help determine what the real potential can be for your youth ministry.

Examples:

#1 - “Transportation/distance.”

How far will or *can* the average youth attendee travel to participate and attend your ministry gatherings? What issues or barriers would a ministry network need to overcome? (IE – denominationalism, strong community catholic leanings, etc)

Once established, try creating a map to visually establish your area of ministry. This does not mean that people outside of this area is not welcome or may even perhaps occasionally come around.

But it does set an area that is your *focus*...the area that you will canvas, advertise in, and potentially invest time and money to evangelize, disciples and recruit participants.

#2 - “Finances.”

While it IS possible to operate a youth ministry on virtually no money at all, it will certainly have a greater potential success if there is even a minimal budget. What you need to consider: do you have resources and outlets in which to acquire financial or material resources? Would your pastor/church be willing to supply a monthly stipend in which to provide the youth ministry of their ministry needs?

(Be prepared to offer careful and written record of all expenses and possible receipts for all purchases...this will often go a long way in gaining trust of those adults in your church who handle such matters.)

Don't be greedy! Start by asking a minimal amount...and when you prove your success you can seek a greater allowance later. (More on this later.)

Ministry Networking

What secondary ministries or groups can you “tap into” to help provide for your broader needs: IE – Discipleship materials, guest teachers and activities, larger group events that you can take your group to?

Who in your area is already reaching out to other organizations and groups with which you could interact and “join forces?” Who should be included in your program and strategy as it develops?

(Consider other organizations and caring adults who work with youth such as: juvenile facilities, treatment centers, schools, sports, law enforcement, etc.)

While larger “corporate” ministry endeavors are great, the reality is that nothing will ever replace or be as successful as the “one-on-one” ministry model. Call it “relational mentoring” or social counseling or whatever.

But targeting ONE INDIVIDUAL for each initial or current participant in your youth ministry to seek out and build a relationship with is an extremely successful method!

Be aware: an elemental and basic spiritual maturity is necessary in order to successfully make this plan work.

Community Ministry

Where and in what groups / places do youth congregate outside of church and school boundaries? (religious or secular locations)

Who is already working to engage those teenagers?

Consider engaging in and/or participating in community service and endeavors even if they are secular.

This helps establish you in your community and lets governmental, secular and business entities know that even though you are Christians you still care about social and community issues. (examples?) This also provides opportunities for your ministry group to SERVE TOGETHER ...which is so important in establishing unity and fellowship and a friendship bond.

It also often provides free publicity and community awareness of your group.

Such group service and blessing can also be exercised on behalf of people and situations within your greater church fellowship;

...this is an outlet for exercising Christian and brotherly love. Example: elderly people who need projects / labor or assistance around their house. Often such needs are ‘labor need’ only and require no materials or financial investment. But even if they do, often other adults are willing to pay for the materials while the youth offer up free labor to make it all happen!

Often such situations “come full circle:” meaning that when it comes time for you to seek out financial support for a project or event, or even food/snacks for a local gathering, it is those people that you blessed in labor that give to you when YOU and your group are in need!

Here's some thoughts on how to grow your group:

1. Grow your leaders.

Your ministry will only grow as much as your leaders grow. God is not going to entrust his potential sheep to you if you do not have the maturity and faithful commitment to minister to them!

As soon as possible, we recommend you form a secondary group or a “secondary ministry level” within your group. **That** group should have higher requirements than just a youth group participant. (more time, effort, maturity, service, commitment, and holy example)

That group should gather at a different time than the general youth meeting times (or maybe once a month your gathering is just the leaders group and NOT the full youth group? This will have the added benefit of keeping you ‘visible’ to the whole group as examples for them.)

...even if it is just two of you, gather to pray for your needs and your people, to strategize and plan for ministry direction and events. This leaders group must be invested in as much (if not more) than your youth group as a whole!

Consider a discipleship study program just for this group that is geared for more spiritually mature youth. Consider a “peer-to-peer” arrangement where two young leaders will take time to pray with **their** peer partner, and will seek to hold each other accountable and transparent on lifestyle practices.

2. Care for the core.

Care for the students you already have. What's the point of adding more teenagers to a group of teenagers who have nothing uniquely Christian about the way they live or share their lives?

If you focus on reaching the ones "out there" at the expense of growing the one "in here," everyone loses. This requires a focused and purposeful discipleship program where your people can grow up in Christ!

The ‘Peer-to-peer’ practice will work here also! Try to structure a system where a more mature young person mentors a spiritually younger individual. (stay male to male, and female to female or things will get messy!)

Sometimes that friendship can make all the difference in a youth’s participation! We all need friends...we all need to be part of a community that cares for us and accepts us.

3. Make your gathering “seeker intelligible.”

What Biblical and spiritual material are you using in your regular gatherings?

Are you considering that you may have visitors and therefore are you using language and programming that they can understand and grasp? Is the teaching and/or the songs you sing loaded with “insider language” that only a churched individual would understand or worse, only someone from your church denomination will understand?

Such practice alienates people and causes them to stay away from your ministry because it makes them feel dumb or outside of the group. Do you use an understandable Bible translation? Can you explain why you sing, give, listen, pray...?

4. Meet regularly.

Select a day and a time that works best for your group and then hold to that schedule. Have a plan for your gathering times...be flexible but don't “wing it.” Announce that you will be starting on time and do so. No “Philippine time”! Have a set **start** time and set **end** time.

Games are great, but if you want spiritually mature youth...young people that really want to live for Christ, you **MUST HAVE MORE THAN GAMES!**

If you do not have someone who is confident about their ability to instruct and lead, then pick a curriculum that effectively “teaches itself”. (We can help with that!)

5. Get out of the church.

Find opportunities to go where students are and to join the rhythm of their life. Ministry isn't only about more people coming to youth gatherings. And ministry can never be only occurring in your weekly youth gatherings.

“Growing” is measured in Gospel conversations being had everywhere....discipleship and relationships happening everywhere...naturally, “organically,” not just in church.

It's the **kingdom of God** that we must seek to advance whether it is part of your specific church or not! Celebrate the stories you are a part of!

God will bless you in accordance to your efforts to bless people, love people, and point them towards the kingdom of God, even if they never come to your specific church!

6. Pray.

Pray in your “leaders group.” Pray in your full groups. Pray in your peer couples. Pray alone, pray together. You **NEED** God with you in this endeavor or you are sure to fail!

He loves you and wants this to succeed if it is a righteous group doing righteous ministry. Pray that the Spirit will prepare hearts and “open doors” of ministry opportunity and will provide for your organization's needs.

Pray that you won't become overly dependent upon programs and events, but that you will always give priority to the **PEOPLE**. Pray that you won't look for validation in numbers. And yes, finally, pray that God will add numbers! His work is the only work that lasts.

The youth ministries we've noticed that are growing make a practice of prayer as core to what they do. They make room to pray.

In the midst of ministry and meetings they view the most important meeting as the one they have with God to intercede on behalf of what they are doing.

They pray for Christian friends to grow strong in their relationship with Jesus and stand in the gap for their non-Christian friends to put their faith in Christ.

They pray for non-Christian teens to be open to the gospel, and for opportunities to share their faith with those non-Christians.

They pray for themselves...that their very LIVES will be a public witness for the reality and power of Jesus, not just in their words or youth gatherings!

7. Live; *"Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ."*

If **you** aren't living Christ out in your everyday living...in the normal day to day stuff, then how can you expect **other youth around you** to do so? Your Christian life must be real and infectious to those in your personal world.

Young people want and need role models...they want to SEE that this Jesus thing work...not just **hear** you preach it in some fashion at your youth gatherings.

Take opportunities to spend one on one time with marginally active people. A little time from you says you care about them and want them around.

8. Inspire.

Never underestimate the power of inspiration. Heck, much of the Bible is inspiration! Young people are **searching** for inspiration. They want to be a part of things that matter and desire to commit their lives to issues, people, and organizations that are seeking to change the world.

This can happen through the stories and testimonies of individuals that are perhaps famous (living or dead) but it also comes through real life people...regular people that are living just down the street from them that seem to be living larger than others!

We need to motivate our teenagers to live THE Cause by telling stories of heroes who were willing to share their faith. And then we need to open up opportunities for the teenagers in our youth groups to tell stories as well!

Some youth groups do this every week. Some youth leaders tie gospel-centric stories into their weekly talks to keep the impact of the gospel as a top priority in their youth ministries. Make a plan of how you are going to inspire your teenagers to share their faith on a regular basis.

9. Equip.

Once a teen is inspired to share their faith they must learn *how* to share their faith in a way that combines the best of relational discipleship and relentless evangelism.

Motivation without *information that leads to application* leads to frustration. In other words, many teenagers have given up the quest to walk in Christ because they simply don't know what such a life really looks like when is being fully and dynamically lived out.

What we need to teach then is not merely scriptural history and the biblical rules of a proper church-going individual. Teenagers want and need to see what a dynamic faith life looks like.

They need to see what the redeemed dynamic encompasses...the blessings, joys, as well as the trials and tribulations they should expect if they take on this lifestyle.

Thus our gatherings...*and the teaching that is given in those gatherings*, must be extremely practical with clear life application.

10. Deploy to multiply.

At the end of the day "The Great Commission" is not just about making converts to Christianity. It's about making ***disciples who make disciples***. Our teenagers are called to reach their friends with the hope of Jesus ...and then disciple the ones who say yes.

Your job is to coach them to do this effectively. Such may seem scary and you may feel inadequate to meet such a challenge at first but, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it can be done.

Will all your teens be ready, willing, and able to do this? **No!** So start with your core group and move out from there. That's what Jesus did.

He started with the ground that produced "thirty, sixty and a hundred fold." He scattered spiritual seeds everywhere and then poured his life into those who were willing to go for it.

"Go with the goers and pray for the others" must be our ministry mantra if we really expect to make our youth group a viable...even dynamic, ministry.
