



jim burns

with Mike DeVries

uncommon youth ministry

YOUR ONRAMP TO LAUNCHING AN
EXTRAORDINARY YOUTH MINISTRY



Published by Regal
From Gospel Light
Ventura, California, U.S.A.
www.regalbooks.com
Printed in the U.S.A.

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Originally published as *The Youth Builder* by Regal 2001.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Burns, Jim, 1953-
[Youth builder]

Uncommon youth ministry : your onramp to launching an extraordinary
youth ministry / Jim Burns, with Mike DeVries.
p. cm.

Originally published: The youth builder. Ventura, Calif. : Regal, 2001.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8307-4683-5 (trade paper)

1. Church work with youth. I. DeVries, Mike. II. Title.

BV4447.B816 2008

259'.2—dc22

2008023488

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dedication



From Jim:

To Cathy—The most influential person in my life. Your support, sacrifice and consistent Christian behavior inspire me. Your faith, commitment and accountability motivate me to focus on Christ. He is the reason for our life together, our shared ministry and this book.

From Mike:

To Jamie—I've never been known to be at a loss for words, except for now. There are not enough words to describe all that you mean to me. Your example of a woman who loves Jesus inspires me to love and know Him more. You are the most authentic, genuine person I have ever met. Thank you for the way you love me. Ever since the day I met you, I have been the most blessed man on the face of the planet. I love you—and I always will.

To Joshua, Megan, Mikalya and Madison—I thank God for allowing me to be your dad. When He gave you to us, He blessed us beyond measure. You have brought so much joy into our lives. You make me laugh in so many ways and make me cry when I think about how much God has blessed me with you. May you know the love of God in your lives in such a deep way that you run to Him, like you do to me, calling out “Daddy!” Remember, I will always, always, always love you!

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foreword

Without a doubt, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* is my favorite youth ministry book ever written. I can say that because I have firsthand experience that the words in *Uncommon Youth Ministry* are life changing. Here are three examples of what I mean.

I was a student in Jim Burns's youth ministry in the 1970s when he was modeling the contents of *Uncommon Youth Ministry* in the local church. Not only was he my youth pastor, but he was also my hero. The reason I am in youth ministry today is because of Jim and his influence on my life while I was a teenager. Jim hadn't yet written any books on youth ministry and he hadn't become a popular leader in the youth ministry movement. What he was doing was learning and practicing everything you'll read about in this book. During those years, he personified the essence of *Uncommon Youth Ministry* in my life.

In the early 1980s, I was taught the principles of *Uncommon Youth Ministry* while serving as an intern for Jim. As my boss, he modeled leadership, integrity and pastoral attitudes that taught me how to move from being a student in his ministry to being a youth worker. Together, we served in our church and partnered in the principles of *Uncommon Youth Ministry*.

When Jim left the local church, I took over his position as youth pastor and maintained the thinking, philosophies and practices of *Uncommon Youth Ministry*. Jim hadn't built a ministry on his personality (and he could have); what he had built was a solid foundation for ministry. I spent the next several years enhancing the healthy foundation he had developed.

Years later, equipped with Jim's teaching, thinking, youth ministry modeling and encouragement, I wrote *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* to complement all that I had learned from Jim. My book is helpful in building a youth ministry strategy; *Uncommon Youth Ministry* goes beyond the strategy and fills in the gaps that *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* leaves behind. In addition to material on the five biblical purposes of youth

foreword

ministry (evangelism, worship, fellowship, discipleship and ministry), *Uncommon Youth Ministry* adds information on camping, creativity, suicide, adolescent development, counseling, and so much more. If you own *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*, you now have a great companion resource in *Uncommon Youth Ministry*.

One of the reasons I continue in youth work is because of what Jim's life has meant to me. He never said, "Doug, follow me as I follow Christ." He didn't need to use those words; I watched a life that was worth following and chose to follow his model. Honestly, I feel like I'm one of the luckiest people on Earth to have had Jim Burns as a youth pastor, boss, partner in ministry and friend. I also believe that you also are lucky to hold in your hands Jim's words, his heart and his lifelong commitment to helping youth workers. Follow these words; they come from a man who knows and loves Jesus Christ.

Doug Fields
President of Simply Youth Ministry
Author, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*

jim's preface and acknowledgments

*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you
not only the gospel of God but our lives as well,
because you had become so dear to us.*

1 THESSALONIANS 2:8

*He took a little child and had him stand among them.
Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these
little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me
does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*

MARK 9:36-37

For me, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* is much more than another book. It is my lifelong work in the field of youth ministry. Within these pages are much of my heart and soul. When I wrote the original book in 1988, I was probably the most surprised of anyone to see it immediately become the biggest selling comprehensive youth ministry book in the world. I was humbled that colleges and seminaries across the globe used it as their text for youth ministry classes and that youth workers whom I knew to be more effective than I ever was actually told me that they benefited from the book. This project has brought me great joy because through it, I share with you whom I respect so very much for your willingness to make a difference in the lives of students.

As the new millennium approached, I was asked to update the book. I realized quite quickly that while I am still intimately involved in the world of youth ministry, I would need the help of someone in the trenches doing outstanding work with students. Who could I find who was a great practitioner and also someone who knew the theory of youth ministry for this new generation of students? I could only think of one

name to be my co-writer for this new addition—Mike DeVries. I told him there was nothing sacred and that I wanted to completely update the book to serve the new and even more-committed youth workers than a generation ago.

I've seen for several years now that the old methods may not work with a new generation of students, so we must look at new approaches to doing youth ministry. Mike was the one person in the world I knew could come alongside me and make *Uncommon Youth Ministry* absolutely relevant for this next generation. He did a great job. What is even more incredible is that we had both worked at the same church, Yorba Linda Friends Church, where some of these illustrations took place. I was on staff before going to graduate school, and Mike served there for more than 11 years.

There are simply too many people to thank for all their help and assistance. Cathy has been the greatest influence in my life. She has lived out the values in this book with sacrifice. Tic Long, Wayne Rice and Mike Yaconelli of Youth Specialties brought on a 25-year-old kid and taught me how to train youth workers. You are my friends, mentors and heroes. Thank you to Noel Becchetti for your macro edit on the first version when you were editor of *Youthworker Journal*. Thank you to the two very special “kids” from my youth worker days, Doug Webster and Doug Fields, both in ninth grade when I met you and now leaders in our movement.

I want to extend special thanks to the staff and board of Home-Word for your willingness to dare to dream. And thank you to Carrie Hicks Steele and Dawnielle Hodgman for your most incredible job on this manuscript.

mike's acknowledgments

*Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you;
your name and renown are the desire of our hearts.*

ISAIAH 26:8

I can still remember the first time I ever read *The Youth Builder*. I was a brand-new youth pastor at Yorba Linda Friends Church. Fresh out of Azusa Pacific University and just starting my first full-time youth ministry position, I read every page. Over the years my first copy of the book has been read and reread. The jacket sleeve is ripped, the pages marked and folded. There is writing on almost every page. The book was foundational for me as a young youth worker. Now, I am reminded of what really matters in youth ministry: being a part of what God is doing to touch the lives of students. May this book be for you, the reader, everything that it was and still is to me.

To Jim—I thank God for bringing us together. You were a mentor from afar—now you are a friend up close. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of working on this project, to tinker and dream with your “baby.” I appreciate you, my brother, and love you. Thanks for believing in me.

To the youth staff at Yorba Linda Friends Church—For 11 years I called YLFC my home. We served together, laughed together, cried together—and through it all we saw God do some amazing things. You all mean the world to me. God has so much in store for you. Keep seeking Him!

To the staff and board of HomeWord—Thank you for welcoming me in as a part of the family. I count it a privilege to be a part of the team. I can't wait to see all that God has for us in the future!

To Dawnielle Hodgman—I thank God that He brought us together. You came as my assistant, but you became my friend. Thank you for

mike's acknowledgments

your encouragement, support and belief in me and this project. Thanks for your tireless work on the manuscript. You're the best!

To Jon Irving—"There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). Thanks for being the brother I never had. I love you.

To Ryan and Alyssa Low, and Jay and Deanne Hoff—Our couple's group has been such a wonderful place of encouragement, transparency and growth. Thank you for standing with Jamie and me through the writing of this book. We love you dearly.

To Mom—Thank you for all the things I've thanked you for, and thank you for the ones I haven't. I love you so very much, Mom. I'm so proud of you.

To my God—May all this be done for Your glory and Your fame.



section I

**the foundation—
pillars for ministry**





what is relational youth ministry?

Your young people are making major decisions that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Adolescence is a time of transition that brings long-lasting effects. As a youth worker, you play a powerful role and have great influence in the lives of your students. In one survey, students on a secular high school campus were asked, “Who would you turn to in time of trouble or for help in life decisions?” The number one choice was parents, but the second choice was youth workers. Not too many years ago, youth ministry in the church was either a glorified baby-sitting service or an insignificant event on the church calendar. Today, however, youth ministry is viewed as one of the key ministries within the church.

But what is effective youth ministry? What does it look like? In the past, good youth ministry was often seen as primarily program-oriented: rallies, events and other elaborately orchestrated gatherings. However, today we have come to realize that long-term influence with lasting impact comes from significant relationships and role models. Of course programming has its place in youth ministry, but the long-term positive influence on the lives of students comes from people, not programs. Programs are a framework in which ministry exists. Programs don’t minister—people minister. The part of ministry that will change the lives of the young people we work with won’t be our speaking or our creative programming. Long after the events are over, long after our messages are forgotten, it will be relationships that are remembered and have the greatest influence.

I (Jim) once asked 1,000 youth workers at a conference to list the five most influential sermons or programs in their lives. One minute

later, no one had come up with five sermons or programs. In fact, the vast majority of the workers could remember only one or two sermons or programs at best. Then I asked them to list five of the most influential people in their lives. After one minute, most of the people in the conference had listed four or five people who had influenced their lives in a significant way. Some listed teachers, some listed youth workers, and others listed parents and others who had taken the time to invest in their lives. Very few were public figures—almost none were famous. Most were ordinary people, like you and me—people who cared about them enough to invest time and energy in their lives. That’s our calling. My guess is that you are where you are today because of a few significant individuals who cared for you on a personal basis. It was those significant relationships that have shaped who you are today. Years from now, if I were to ask the same question to a room full of youth workers, would your name be on that list?

In order to have an important influence in the lives of young people, you do not need to be a dynamic speaker, know all the latest music, or even dress in the latest fashions. You must, however, love kids and be willing to spend time with them, which is what effective, relational youth ministry is all about. Effective youth workers may never be polished, dynamic communicators or highly creative programmers, but they do need to have a heart of compassion, a listening ear and a willingness to get to know the students in their youth ministry. *Genuinely caring for your students is the primary prerequisite for working with them.*

incarnational ministry

After I (Jim) had finished speaking to a group of youth workers in Kansas, several of them came up to talk. The particular issues varied, but the question was the same: “What program can I use to keep my group enthusiastic about their faith?” My answer was probably disappointing to some people. There are a variety of proven methods; many different youth ministry organizations, denominations, books and individual

churches use every type of program imaginable—and they all seem to work. Yet at the same time, any method can also fail!

However, there is a way to build a youth group spiritually and numerically—contrary to what some might say, youth go where other kids are, so numbers can at times be important. There is one word that stands out above all others—“relationship.”

Our Christian faith is sealed in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Theologically, Jesus is the *incarnation* of God. He is God in the flesh (see Colossians 1:15). As the ministry of Jesus was incarnate in the Gospels, so our life must be incarnate in youth ministry. Jesus stepped into our world to identify with us: to walk as we walk, to experience what we experience, to talk and relate to us in relationship. So it is with us as we enter into an incarnate relationship with our students. If we are ever to have a positive influence on our young people, we must build relationships with them and live out our faith in their midst.

Young people tire of shallow and hollow programs or manipulative methods. They can see through false pretenses. They are looking for something deeper, something real and something authentic. While building relationships we become the hands and feet—and even the voice—of Jesus in their lives. As we seek to build relationships with the students we minister to, they will see us as real and approachable, genuine in faith and a friend to be trusted. By building genuine relationships with them and allowing them to see healthy adult staff relationships, we will be considered friends and mentors. We believe that the students who remain active in the youth ministry will stay, not because of our creative programming, but because of healthy and genuine relationships. Students who are connected to their peers and adults stay, and staying power is created by mixing the six basic ingredients of an effective relational youth ministry.

team ministry

Young people are looking for role models to imitate. The adult staff (whether comprised of scores of youth workers or a husband-and-wife volunteer team) must build toward a loving, unified team before any

young person will stand up and take notice. We believe that the first commitment that a new youth worker should make in the church, even before developing a ministry with students, is to develop a youth ministry team. Relational youth ministry starts with a relational youth staff. Jesus told His disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

In other words, the youth in your church and community will often judge the attractiveness and validity of the gospel by the relationships that the staff members have with one another.

Take time to build significant relationships with your staff, and encourage affirming friendships between them. You will be creating a wonderful role model for your students. You will also be cementing the volunteer staff's involvement in youth ministry. The youth group is watching, listening and at times imitating the relationship role models of the staff.

A unified staff is one that prays and shares with each other. A unified staff plays together. Some of the best quality times for building staff unity can be done in the very same manner as with students: through playing together, shopping or other "fun" activities.

Be as proactive and intentional in building and nurturing relationships with your staff as you are in building and nurturing relationships with your students. It is an area of ministry that is often neglected because we are so focused on our ministry to students, but it is one that will expand our ministry's effectiveness. As your youth staff develops a mutual love, support and respect for each other, your young people will notice and respond.

modeling

Most likely, your greatest influence will not be in what you teach through your words; rather, it will be through your actions, reactions and lifestyle.

The most effective teaching that takes place is usually not during the formal teaching times but, rather, when students get to know their youth worker on a relational level. What students need today is not an adult that dresses like they do, knows all the latest trends in youth culture or even talks like they do. What students need today are adults that are crazy about them and are willing to share their lives with them. Students need models. They will be watching your life and mine—what will they find?

Every year our group has a senior banquet. It's a time for our seniors to share what God has done in their lives over the past four years. For years, I (Mike) kept waiting for students to say that it was our great programming that changed their lives. Perhaps it was all the creative messages we gave. Rather, what we heard time and time again was about significant relationships.

For example, we might hear something similar to “It was the time when my parents were getting a divorce and I needed someone who understood what I was going through. I thought of Megan. She let me spend the night and told me all about her struggle and how God had helped her. She listened to me, cried with me and prayed for me. I'll never forget that.” Students need role models of what Christianity looks like lived in the context of life's issues. They need to see a model—not a perfect one, but one that can show them the way.

unconditional love

The truth of the gospel is that God loves us not for what we do but for who we are. God loves us unconditionally. His love is sacrificial and deep. Grace permeates our relationship with our Lord. We also must love our students with an unconditional, no-strings-attached love. We must accept the fact that kids will fail. When they miss the mark, they need our love and encouragement to keep trying. They need to know that no matter where they've been or what they've done, our love for them remains unchanged. In a world that is marked by conditional love, our unconditional love can make all the difference.

Your actions of unconditional love will often be the determining factor in solidifying the faith of your students. How can they know God's grace and love if they don't see it firsthand from significant others? The apostle John's words are so important for youth workers: "Let us not love with words or tongue *but with actions* and in truth" (1 John 3:18, emphasis added). In other words, actions really do speak louder than words.

Once while chaperoning a party for one of the local high schools, I (Jim) watched one of our core leadership kids literally being carried out of the party because he had passed out from drinking too much. I was hurt; he was embarrassed. Of course, on Sunday he didn't come to our group. I decided I had to go to him and let him know I loved him and still wanted him in our group. He had to learn that even though he made a mistake, he was still accepted by our group and leaders. Even through this negative experience, he would understand the *grace* of God in a stronger, more meaningful way. Recently this young man told me that if we had not loved him with unconditional love, he probably would never have come back to church. Don't miss the opportunity to demonstrate God's grace to your students.

nurturing

There is no such thing as instant spiritual maturity. Sanctification is a continuing process. Just as newborn babies need constant care and nourishment, so young people need our consistent attention, time and presence. Effective youth ministry with a lasting and eternal impact takes time and nurturing.

The reason we have so many young people with stunted spiritual growth is because we have not given them the nurturing needed to produce vibrant spiritual lives. One of the major goals of youth ministry should be to move the students from dependence on us—the youth workers—to dependence on God. Yet we need to remember that the process takes time. Many youth workers have been guilty of manipulative methods to produce quick fixes or instant spiritual maturity, only

to see in the long run that this tactic failed to produce healthy and genuine spiritual fruit.

The Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon. Students need to know that their youth leaders will walk *with them* through the Christian journey and nurture them to become all that God desires them to be.

meeting students on their territory

We live in a fast-paced culture. If the Church stands still and waits for youth to come to it, then the Church will have a long, quiet, empty and frustrating wait. Meeting students on their territory is vital because it breaks down the often imposing walls of the Church. To get a response from young people, it is important to go out to the schools and hang-outs in order to interact with them. For many youth workers this means watching a high school soccer game or helping with decorations for the school play, rather than spending time in the office. It's finding out where students are and making a decision to enter their world.

By going into the students' world, you will show them that you are interested in them as people, not just as church participants. One of the most important aspects of ministry is to let them know you care. Your presence and commitment to be in their world communicates care and concern.

Entering their world can become a great tool for evangelism. Young people will introduce you to their friends, and as new friendships evolve, others too will want to see what the youth group is all about.

Contact work—meeting your students on their territory—is one of the most rewarding aspects of youth ministry. When we show up at a school event, game or even lunch, they will usually react with enthusiasm because they see that we were willing to take time out of our busy schedule to take an interest in them.

While working with Young Life, I (Jim) remember going to soccer games and practices. Eventually the coach asked me to help with the team for the last few games. Actually, I was more like an adult water boy. At the time we had two guys on the team coming to our Young Life

club. Before the season was over a majority of the team had come to one of our club meetings. There was nothing more effective that entire year than spending a considerable amount of time on that soccer field.

You can learn a great amount about the youth culture when you invade young people's territory. Be a student of their world; watch and listen. If you want to really understand the world students live in, spend a day on a local campus. Your life will never be the same.

spending time with students

Students need significant adults to give them time and attention. It takes both quality and quantity time to do effective relational youth ministry. Some time ago I (Jim) called up two high school guys one Saturday morning and asked them to go shopping with me at the mall. I already knew what I wanted to buy, but I thought it might be good to spend some time with those two guys. After finding what I wanted to buy, we walked around the mall for an hour and went to the food court. During lunch we had a very nonthreatening, open conversation about the Christian life. As I look back, the investment of those few hours and the conversation that took place were far more productive than all the Sunday School classes I had ever taught those two students.

Educators talk about the idea of hidden curriculum, which means that we must look for every opportunity, or teachable moment, outside the classroom setting to teach our students. When you spend time with kids in your ministry, you are showing them that they are important and that you really care. A friend of mine plays basketball with a group of guys every week. He told me that he talks more about God before, during and after the weekly basketball game than at any other time during the week.

Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, used to say, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the gospel." The gospel of Jesus is the most exciting news the world will ever hear, yet young people often drop out of the church because it's boring. In truth what many are saying is not so much that church is boring, but that it's unengaging. They left without

significantly connecting with anyone. We believe that one of the major reasons kids drop out of church and call it boring is because no one was willing to take an interest in or spend time with them. Students stay when they have built relationships and connected with others.

reaching out

We can't compete with the latest technology in media to keep kids' interest. Producers and advertisers spend millions of dollars to gain and keep the attention of adolescents. However, there is one thing that television, the Internet or any other competitors for kids' attention cannot give—a real flesh-and-blood relationship. Students will respond to someone who genuinely cares about them and is willing to spend time with them.

Relationships are the *key* to effective youth ministry. The greatest programs will fail and the most interesting curriculum will never be absorbed if the primary focus in youth ministry is not building solid, encouraging, positive relationships with students. The great news for most of us is that it isn't necessary for us to be an excellent communicator or to produce incredible programs; rather, what we truly need is a willingness to spend time with kids and let them know we care.