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**REVISED &
UPDATED
EDITION**



PROTECT

A YOUTH WORKER'S GUIDE TO NAVIGATING RISK

YM360

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Protect: A Youth Worker's Guide to Navigating Risk

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Published by youthministry360, in the United States of America.

ISBN 13: 9781954429413

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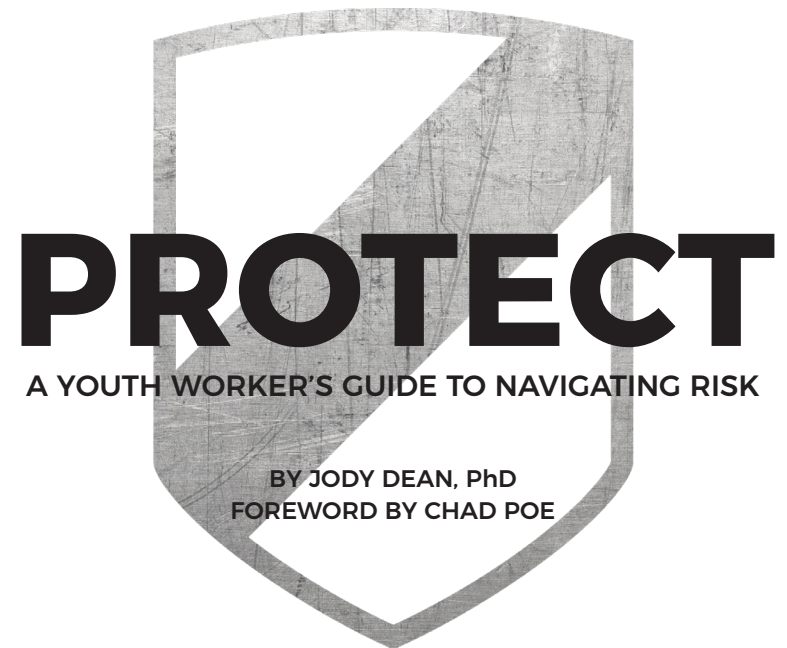
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Published 2024.
First edition published 2019. Second edition 2024.

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PUBLISHED BY YM360

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FOREWORD

Today's teenagers are facing issues around each and every corner. These issues want to rob these young people of the joy that life can really provide. In the Scriptures, we see that the enemy is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). However, Our Good Shepherd, Jesus, protects by laying His life down for the sheep. As His undershepherds, we must also be willing to make sacrifices.

I have a personal investment in the protection of both teenagers and the church. First and foremost, I am a dad of two teenage boys and a preteen daughter. (I also have an elementary school son who thinks he is a teenager). Secondly, I am a church pastor and care so much about the families I shepherd being protected. Alongside these responsibilities, I speak with and preach to teenagers regularly. I have invested much of my adult life in an effort to ensure that teenagers hear about and have opportunities to come to know this Jesus who loves and cares for them so deeply. I also believe youth ministry leaders matter because I am the result of a youth ministry leader who believed that I mattered. I work with multiple youth ministry leaders regularly to help them grow in their ability to preach and teach. I want them to make wise decisions to

protect their ministries because, far too often, I have grieved with various church leaders in instances where this did not happen. The Lord and His Church deserve youth ministry leaders who are proactive rather than reactive. Jesus deserves youth ministry leaders who graciously walk in His steps (1 John 2:6) and do not compromise our calling as ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

In *Protect*, Jody helps youth ministry leaders think through how we make sacrifices to protect Jesus' sheep. I do not know of anyone more qualified to guide us along the path of protecting our people. In the time I have known him, Jody has consistently served the local church and New Orleans Seminary simultaneously. He is a voice to be trusted in the areas of caring for and protecting our people. These can be difficult, time-consuming, and necessary processes. However, they are worth it because our people are worth it. Our youth ministries are worth it. Jesus is worth it!

By Chad Poe



PART 1

SHEPHERDING THROUGH CHARACTER

In this section, we look at how important it is that youth pastors have a good reputation, earned through a life of character, calling, and integrity. It follows logically that volunteers would be expected to have good reputations based upon high character and integrity as well, and the expectation of parents (and of insurance companies) is that we will conduct background checks on any person who works with a minor in any capacity. Next, we talk about keeping up with the students—check in, check out, drop off procedures, etc. Finally, we speak to the utilization of church resources in a way that is competent and inspires confidence in parents and church members who invest in youth ministry, either through offerings or registration.

CHAPTER 1

CALLING & CHARACTER

CALLING

I surrendered to a call to ministry in ninth grade. I knew I was being called but struggled with the process because I was young and still trying to figure out how to live daily as a Christ follower. Although the world and the culture that we live in and minister to are very different from when I surrendered to a call as a teenager, I still believe God calls teenagers to full-time ministry through the local church and to the nations. I also think that the call to serve in student ministry is unique, and living out that call today is more complex and might be more difficult than ever before. These are just a few of the reasons why all youth ministry leaders (full-time, part-time, bi-vocational, or volunteer) need a sense of call to work with teenagers. Today's students not only need devoted leaders, but they also need leaders who can interact with them with integrity. Calling and character are the key factors to being able to lead student ministry. In a society filled with parents, teachers, and coaches who are failing students, the Church should be the one place where leaders do not fail the students by disqualifying themselves for ministry.

The headlines have increased of churches where a leader, whether staff or volunteer, had gross moral negligence with a minor or adult. Sexual harassment, misconduct, or abuse has caused the fiduciary trust of leaders to be reduced or simply erased. Although many serve faithfully each week in student ministries, those who have been disqualified have caused all of us in ministry to continually remind people that we are to be people of character.

The calling to reach, disciple, and embrace a generation of teenagers is unique to many areas of ministry. The evolving family structure combined

with the challenges of navigating a changing culture provides a level of hardship that other ministry areas do not experience at the same level. Your calling to students must not be one that is self-appointed. This book is not intended to cause you to question your calling but to walk you through what it means to shepherd a youth ministry that is safe and secure.

Parents desire for their students to be in a safe place. Many apps have been created to help parents shepherd their teenagers in accountable ways. A tracking app for where they are and how fast they travel is one example of the parent's desire for safety. A parent tries to reduce harm and threats from their child. The mother's intuition is hard to overcome. However, a call to serve the Lord is not a family-initiated endeavor, minister-led, or a church process; it is the individual hearing from the Lord about their life and service unto the Lord. Jonah is one example that reminds us that we can only run from the Lord's intent for us to serve Him for a season. The call can be a small group leader, volunteer, co-vocational minister, full-time minister, or missionary, to name a few ways those of us in ministry have surrendered to the ministry.

CHARACTER OF THOSE CALLED

Qualifications for those who teach, oversee the work in the church, or fulfill the role of elder are unique areas that the Bible reminds us of the character needed to serve in those capacities. Character is not exclusive to those in ministry. Each Christian is expected to be a person of Christian values and character. Personal character is a challenge because, in church, we rely on the personal code of character in vetting a minister or volunteer in student ministry. We have resources like "Ministry Safe" or a background check process, but neither replaces the relationship factor of knowing someone and their testimony and lifestyle evidence of a growing Christ follower. The challenge is that even if they make a passing score on their Ministry Safe quiz, have a green light from their background check, and you have a good feeling from interacting with the person—it does not mean that they have the integrity or the character of the person you think they are. The current statistics for pornography and gambling addictions in our culture alone are startling, and these numbers are increasing as more and more young adults (yes, even professing Christians) are engaging in these activities online. To combat this ever-changing landscape, you need a robust interviewing and onboarding process for all ministry staff and volunteers who will be working with teenagers that involves several steps and more people than yourself. But you must also understand that even the best processes won't always catch everything. You must be engaged in interacting with people, observing, and continuing to evaluate people for their integrity and character.

A time existed when a person could be believed based on their reputation, their words, and a handshake. Today, that basic affirmation of trust and commitment is challenged as many do not live up to their word or their commitments. Many youth ministry leaders and volunteers start off with good intentions, but time gets squeezed, and they forget, or something else comes up, and the overall character begins to tarnish for a teenager or parent. I can still name faithful people who have invested in my life and had the character of a person I desire to mature into. A person I wanted to imitate as I watched their walk with the Lord. Men and women who modeled the Christian faith in real ways consistently. As I write this, names and faces are pouring over my memory, putting a smile on my face as I think about their wisdom, compassion, and faithfulness to show up, serve, and lead faithfully toward Him.

A teenager deserves people in the church who will rise up and entrust to them the path of walking with the Lord. Each generation needs leaders of character that model the faith—not just understood but applied within the framework of everyday life. Teenagers are wrestling with their faith, growing in their spiritual maturity, and simultaneously trying to understand the truth as they strive to be utilized as part of the Church today. Some will be called to ministry while on this discipleship path, just like in Paul's letters to the churches, where we see leaders being called to serve the churches. Timothy is one of those young leaders whom Paul wrote several letters giving instructions for growing up in the faith and executing his call to ministry in the church.

A constant theme in Paul's writing was the gifting and utilization of talents through the local community. Those who serve in youth ministry need to see their work as living out a calling and not something they do because someone "needed to step up." You have probably seen volunteers move from being a volunteer to feeling a call to serve in ministry in a more formal way. I have seen firsthand volunteers move from a general willingness to serve to a more defined calling for youth ministry. However, I have also observed that many people serving our churches (who have a calling to ministry) are not being as encouraged to live out that calling in youth ministry as they were a generation ago. Therefore, we are experiencing a significant deficit of called youth ministry leaders. I believe one potential solution to this growing issue is continuing to cultivate calling as a possible path for those currently volunteering. As this deficit for youth ministers continues to increase, we, as the Church, can help develop people to fill that void.

Character has been a struggle in American politics and the Church my whole life. Unfortunately, from the President to a camp pastor, moral

failings seem to be a regular, and thanks to social media, highly publicized occurrence. I vividly remember when a pastor who spoke at conferences, camps, and worship services that I had been a part of was front page news for moral accusations and resigned from his church. It caused me to be numb and question the decisions I made at camp when they were leading or truths from God's Word that I had gleaned from their teaching. There have been numerous character concerns with people since the fall in the Garden with Adam and Eve. As youth ministry leaders, we know that our hope should not be in people but in Christ and His church. However, when a character or integrity flaw is exposed in a volunteer or paid staff member, it challenges teenagers with what they believe. As people who speak and teach the truths of the Bible to others, we need to know that this holy honor comes with a high calling to live a life worthy of that call to employ our gifts through the local church. We also must understand that we serve against an enemy who knows our weakness and delights in challenging our character to try and discredit the work Christ is doing with His people and through His church. It is essential to shepherd people to protect their character as they serve. Teenagers must also be challenged to live with their character in check. The enemy likes to challenge and discredit them among their peers and the places they interact with others. A passage that reminds me of this truth is through Jesus' teaching for us to be *salt and light* saying:

"[13] You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. [14] You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

– Matthew 5:13-16



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Does your youth ministry help students and volunteers understand calling and how it relates to their lives?
2. Do you have processes in place to vet your volunteers in areas of character?
3. How do you continue cultivating your people to be salt and light through their private and public character?