

WHAT'S RIGHT ABOUT YOUTH MINISTRY

Six Values Great Youth Ministries Embrace

By Mark Oestreicher
with responses from Kurt Johnston



CHAPTER 1: THE SECRET SAUCE OF GREAT YOUTH MINISTRY

I'm a pot-stirrer.

I have carved out a little niche in the youth ministry world by being a contrarian. I have spoken, written, taught, preached, and conversed until I'm blue in the face about our need for change in youth ministry.

There was a “youth ministry must change or die” vibe to my blog for years. And in the last decade-plus, all kinds of amazing research has come out to support my “windbaggedness.”

- Christian Smith's research in the National Study on Youth and Religion created a tipping point into angst for thousands of youth workers; his identification of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as the primary faith of American teenagers (Christian or not) rocked us. Kenda Dean's brilliant follow-up to this study, *Almost Christian*, framed

the bleak issues with a sole focus on Christianity.

- An oft-quoted Southern Baptist survey (among others) showed teenagers leaving the church and their faith at a rate of up to eighty percent (other surveys, by other groups, revealed tempered—but still startling—results).
- Chap Clark told us that teenagers are deeply Hurt, and we all knew—even if we didn’t verbalize it—that our rah-rah youth group approaches weren’t addressing that pain and isolation.
- The Fuller Youth Institute’s *Sticky Faith* research was more upbeat, as it provided proactive steps. But the unspoken implication was clear: What we’ve been doing does not promote a faith that lasts.
- Even my own book, *Youth Ministry 3.0*, made the case that most of us are framing our youth ministry thinking and approaches around a culturally outdated priority of need for autonomy, when the dominant need of today’s teenager is belonging.

As I crisscrossed the country speaking to and with youth workers, and as I interacted with them via phone and email and Facebook and blog comments, I heard a growing sense of depression. My primary work these days is leading a yearlong coaching program for youth workers, and through it I’ve benefited from a courtside seat to the inner thinking and practices of roughly 450 youth workers’ insecurities, questions, and longings. Sure, there are arrogant youth workers who are convinced they’re doing well because they “have the numbers to prove it.” But the average youth worker

these days—at least among those who read youth ministry books and articles and blogs—seems to have a looming sense of malaise: “I still love teenagers and feel called to them, but everything I read tells me I’m failing.”

That’s a difficult place to minister out of, that feeling of missing the mark.

Despite chipper reminders from optimists like Kurt Johnston (of Saddleback Church), pleading with us that “the youth ministry sky is not falling,” there’s a black cloud overhead for many youth workers.

This book is not a 180. I’m not going to stop pushing for change. I will continue to rant and write manifestos. I will continue to poke the bear.

But I’ve also experienced a bit of a perspective shift. During my decade at Youth Specialties, I certainly had contact with a multitude of youth workers. However, I can see in hindsight that my role put me in a bit of a silo (or some other metaphor that would be the ministry organization equivalent of an academic ivory tower). In the past nine years, in my work with The Youth Cartel, I’ve had so many more long conversations with in-the-trenches youth workers. I’m overstating this, but I feel—in some ways—that I’ve become reacquainted with real youth pastors.

This move from the executive suite to the street has brought me face-to-face, over and over again, with the daily contrasting realities of pain and hope that real youth workers live with. And I’ve been reminded of the good stuff. I mean, I never left youth ministry (I’ve been a volunteer small group

leader at my church for twenty years), so I knew the good stuff of living into my calling and having great conversations with teenagers and the joy of doing youth ministry with other servants. But I was a bit too focused on the part of the glass that's empty, the black-cloud stuff.

So, no, this book isn't refuting what I've ranted about before or what I will, surely, say in the future and later want to rant about. Instead, this is my small attempt to describe the goofy, awkward, messy beauty in the full part of the glass (whatever percentage it is).

There's a subtle arrogance (and I've definitely fallen prey to this) in thinking that we've blown it. That might sound strange, because an honest acknowledgement of where we truly have missed the mark requires a massive dose of humility. But often embedded in much of the conversation about how to "fix" youth ministry (I'm calling myself out here) is the unspoken idea that I am capable, and that you are capable, of transforming the lives of teenagers. The thinking is: if teenagers don't embrace a robust faith, and it was because I wasn't doing youth ministry right, then if I change things up, I can cause them to be more Christian.

Along the way, we've often misplaced the gorgeous value of patience.

The mundane way of steadfastness.

The unflashy path of consistency.

We forget what we've taught our teenagers, over and over again: that God often uses the most improbable and unskilled

to do his most amazing work.

The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well (John 4:4-26) understood almost nothing about who Jesus really was or the living water he offered her. She was a Samaritan (despised by Jews), and a woman in an almost exclusively patriarchal culture. She'd had five husbands and was living with another dude (sin!). But she was the first missionary, proclaiming her story with simple words (John 4:29, NIV): "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"

Before he met Jesus, Matthew, author of the Gospel book, was among the most hated of all people—an evil, swindling tax collector, buddies with the worst of the worst sinners, traitor to his people, instrument of oppression. He became a disciple of Jesus.

Peter, of course, was a hotheaded loose cannon and a nobody. But then Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18, NLT).

Even minor characters throughout Scripture fit this pattern:

- Simeon, the old dude hanging around the temple, recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah and had the opportunity to pray over him and bless him (Luke 2:25-35).
- David's Mighty Men, before anyone referred to them that way and before they participated with God in jaw-dropping feats straight out of the best action movies (2 Samuel 23:8-23), were a bunch of losers—distressed and in debt and discontented (1 Samuel 22:1-2).

- The kid with the weird little lunch of loaves and fish got to participate in one of the greatest miracles ever, feeding an entire amphitheater of people (John 6:1-15).
- Even Mary, mother of Jesus, was a teenager with no prominence, no particular standout ministry skills.

We've told these stories to teenagers as examples of how God wants to use even them. So shouldn't it make sense that God wants to use even us? Even you? Even me? And doesn't it follow that God will work through us to draw teenagers to himself, whether we have brilliant youth ministry skills or not, whether we have the right approach or not?

A modern-day story was shared with me recently by a friend of mine, gifted veteran youth pastor Sam Halverson. Sam had a teenage guy in his group (we'll call him Tim) who'd shown no spiritual interest whatsoever and was normally brooding and dark in his outlook. At a particular worship time, the students in Sam's group were given some space to reflect on their spiritual lives. Tim sat by himself and was drawn into a very personal something. Sam couldn't tell what was going on, whether Tim was having a profound spiritual moment, or was angry, or something else. He noticed Tim with his head down; as Sam moved around the room and neared Tim, he could tell Tim was in the midst of something intense. Sam said he had no idea what to do. Should he interrupt what was possibly a personal moment between Tim and God and ask Tim what was going on? Should he lay hands on Tim and pray for him? Should he leave Tim alone?

Sam, feeling helpless and bumbling, lightly touched Tim on the shoulder and quietly said, "I'm here." Tim nodded

but said nothing. As he walked away, Sam felt he'd probably blown it and that there was likely something better he should have done (though he had no idea what that better thing would have been).

A week later, Tim's mom called Sam about another issue. At the end of the call, she said, "Oh, and I wanted to tell you thanks for what you did for Tim." Sam was confused. Tim's mom continued. "Tim told me that he was really struggling with whether or not God even exists. In that prayer time, Tim was begging God to reveal himself. He prayed, 'If you're real, God, then do something—right now—to say "I'm here!"' Tim told me that the second he prayed that, you put your hand on his shoulder and said, 'I'm here.'"

The fact is, Sam is a great youth worker. He's smart and relational and creative and caring. But that moment with Tim had nothing to do with Sam's youth ministry skills. Sam felt like he'd blown it! But God was working through Sam and in Tim.

Maybe the glass is more full than we realize. Maybe the sky isn't falling.

THE OPTIMIST'S PUSHBACK

All of this perspective reorienting has me asking a few hard questions (questions I can hardly believe I'm asking, because they're so imbued with optimism, even if it doesn't look that way):

- What if all our tweaking and trying to fix the broken

system is actually creating a problem bigger than the one we're trying to solve?

- What if our pushing and tweaking are merely masking our lack of dependence on God, or our own Messiah complexes?
- What damage will be done if we spend the next twenty years in youth ministry replacing one methodology with another methodology?
- What if we're asking the wrong questions?
- What if this whole youth ministry thing is simpler than we make it out to be?

WHAT'S THE POINT OF YOUTH MINISTRY?

A youth ministry friend of mine recently asked me a version of this question, but he phrased it this way: “What’s the single objective of youth ministry?” Questions like that scare me, because as soon as I offer a response, I think of another possible answer.

I like complexity and abhor easy-answer theology. Identifying a “single objective” of anything is tough, because we always have multiple objectives—always, whether we want to or not. I’d be so much more comfortable with a list of objectives than singling one out.

But...

On this question, I’d like to play ball. And I’m gonna use

one word to answer it: Christlikeness. That's our singular objective. If I were to put it into a sentence, it would be something like: "The single objective of youth ministry is to walk with teenagers on their journey toward Christlikeness."

Of course, there are a ton of secondary objectives implied in my sentence (as is—did I already write this?—always the case). For instance, we can't merely say, "The objective is discipleship" without addressing what we mean by "discipleship."

My role as a youth worker is to honestly live my own journey toward Christlikeness with and in front of the teenagers in my midst. I can't change teenagers—that's the Holy Spirit's job. I'm not directly in the transformation business; **I'm in the transformation-hosting business.** Hosting is a metaphor that brings up sub-metaphors like steward ("How do I steward the time I have with teenagers in a way that best exposes them to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit?"), curator ("How can I highlight and bring attention to the good stuff God is already doing in the world and in the lives of teenagers?"), and evangelist.

Wait—did I just write evangelist?

Yup—but I don't mean it in the way you might think. I mean it in the same way that Apple might have an evangelist on staff (an iPad evangelist's job is to share the good news about iPads). My role as a youth worker is to be the evangelist for teenagers in my church. I am the lead banner-waver for teenagers in my congregation (or one of the banner-wavers, since I'm on a team), reminding people in the congregation of their responsibility to collectively engage with the

teenagers in their midst.

IS YOUTH MINISTRY BIBLICAL?

There's been a small-but-loud rash of pushback on youth ministry in recent years, suggesting that it's unbiblical. In many ways, it's rooted in an understanding of a Bible passage.

The Shema is Israel's most important Scripture. God-fearing Jews, to this day, pray the Shema first thing when they wake up and last thing before they go to sleep.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NIV)

Christian theologian and author Scot McKnight has proposed we embrace the same practice, adding a line from Jesus, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and calling it *The Jesus Creed*.

But the next two verses in Deuteronomy contain the bits being used as an argument against youth ministry:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, NIV)

Actually, Deuteronomy 6 refers to parents and their children a few times. This is one of the primary places in Scripture that we see the responsibility of parents clearly laid out in terms of the spiritual formation of their kids. It's a good, biblically sound argument.

But this movement goes way beyond passionately calling parents to step up in terms of leading their children and teenagers spiritually. The movement suggests that youth ministry is unbiblical because it isn't mandated in the Bible. At a recent event on these issues, a youth ministry friend of mine shared the stage with a guy whose official title was "Youth Ministry Abolitionist." Wow.

Let's list a few things that are common in our churches today that aren't listed in the Bible:

- Baptismal pools and fonts
- Church buildings
- Hired clergy
- Church budgets
- Church buses and vans
- Sound systems
- Children's ministry
- Men's ministry
- Women's ministry
- Senior adult ministry

That list could easily be ten or a hundred times as long, right? And those aren't bad things. They are contextual approaches to doing church (which, for the record, is not quite the same as being the church).

In one sense, of course, there's no directive about youth ministry in the Bible. Adolescence, while always existing (contrary to popular myth—see Crystal Kirgiss's excellent and fun book *In Search of Adolescence: A New Look at an Old Idea*) in both developmental and culture ways, has taken on unique shaping realities with the rise of modern youth culture. So adolescence was much less of a cultural issue when the Bible was written. And yet, we can still see plenty of examples in Scripture of other adults (not the parent of the child or young person) playing a significant role in the faith development of a "youth." For example: Samuel and Eli (1 Samuel 3). But looking for a biblical directive is somewhat beside the point.

The church is called (see: the New Testament!) to share the gospel and grow disciples, to be the presence of Christ on earth. In a world where youth culture exists, this simply must include adults who are cross-cultural missionaries, willing to embody the gospel into that cultural context. If we're not willing to do this, we're not being the church.

Hear me: this does not mean that I think we should consistently remove teenagers from their parents and wall them up in isolated spaces with only their peers (and a few crazy adults willing to get pizza stains on their shirts and dodge dodgeballs). But it doesn't have to be an either/or situation.

We can *both* be engaged in ministry to and with teenagers *and* support parents in their role of spiritually leading their children.

All of this assumes we're interacting with parents who give

a rip, of course. There's plenty of important youth ministry to be done with teenagers whose parents are completely disengaged. I know I'm preaching to the choir here. Not too many Youth Ministry Abolitionists will be reading this book.

I was going to move on now, but I feel compelled to write a bit more from my personal experience.

First, I wouldn't be where I am without the loving input of youth workers in my own life. My parents are amazing. They're godly people, loving parents, and were very engaged in my life. We spent lots of time together, and they actively modeled their faith in front of me on a daily basis. No, they weren't perfect, but they were everything we would hope teenagers would have, and more.

And yet I needed, and my parents were glad for, other adults speaking into my life.

Fast-forward. I am a parent of two young adults. Riley is currently 24, and just graduated from college as I write. Max is 20 and in the midst of college years. I love my kids, and they're a very high priority in my life. We love being together, and we hang out all the time. I regularly speak into their lives, draw boundaries, encourage competencies, talk about faith stuff, and do multiple other things we all hope teenagers would get from their parents. I'm far from perfect. But I was humbled and encouraged when my church's youth pastor told me I'm a great dad (and even more so when my own kids tell me that).

Would my two children, when teenagers, have been okay if my church's youth ministry didn't exist? Maybe. But time and

time and time again, I have been thankful for both paid and volunteer youth workers who loved Riley and Max, spoke truth to them, provided a safe place for them to be honest about questions and screw-ups, and encouraged them toward Jesus. I could not be more thankful for the youth workers from my church and their role in my kids' lives.

Yes, more than a youth worker, I am a parent who is thankful for youth ministry. I'm fairly certain your church is full of parents like me.

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF GREAT YOUTH MINISTRY

Have you ever said something, off the cuff, then realized that there was more truth to it than you even intended? That happened to me a few years back.

I was in Orlando, speaking at the e625 convention (an international convention for Spanish-speaking youth workers). I love these events. After attending many of them in Argentina and Guatemala, I hadn't been to one in a couple of years, and I'd missed it. The energy is higher than at the youth worker conventions you may have attended. The attendees are noticeably un-jaded. They are genuinely eager. And that's infectious.

I was teaching a two-and-a-half-hour *super curso* on my book *Youth Ministry 3.0*, of course with a translator. I'd barreled through the cultural creation of modern youth culture, the extension of adolescence (both the beginning and the end points), the three tasks of adolescence, and the shifting prioritization of those tasks. The standing-room-only

group in the room was totally engaged and asked fantastic questions. Their body language was all “I’m in.” So, I should have closed it out with a handful of suggestions and packed it up.

But with about fifteen minutes to go, I had a sense. Call it the Holy Spirit, call it reading something subtle in the responses, or call it—more likely—just stepping outside of myself for a moment and noticing how passionately I was speaking (hyping?) this stuff that was, to one extent or another, merely my opinion and conjecture. I had this sense that I was burdening my Latin American youth-working friends with a bunch of technology that they didn’t need. (I’m using technology in the broadest sense here, meaning the systems and methodologies and scaffolding we construct and perpetuate.)

I stopped. I said:

Let me be clear about the three things that are necessary for great youth ministry:

1. *You like teenagers.*
2. *You are a growing follower of Jesus.*
3. *You are willing to live honestly in the presence of those teenagers you like.*

After I said it, I thought to myself, “That was actually true!” It had a sense of surprise to it.

Do we need more theological reflection in youth ministry?

Yup.

Do we need to rethink our assumptions and practices? Sure.

Do we need to study the changing face of the teenage experience and adjust accordingly? Yes.

Do we need a revolution in youth ministry? I still think so.

But what we don't need is to replace one technology ("programs are the answer!") with another technology ("post-programming is the answer!").

What we need—and this is why I've always felt that some of the best youth ministry happens in small churches with zero technology—are:

- Adults who like teenagers.
- Adults who are actively growing in their own faith.
- Adults who will live authentically in relationship with those teenagers they like.

I can hardly believe I'm writing this, but there really is a magic formula—a math equation—for great youth ministry:

$$\begin{array}{c} \textit{A grace-filled caring adult who's willing} \\ \textit{to be present with teenagers} \\ + \\ \textit{A small-ish group of teenagers} \\ + \\ \textit{The power of the Holy Spirit and presence of Jesus} \\ = \\ \textit{Fantastic youth ministry!} \end{array}$$

I'm going to keep harping and ranting and instigating. But I can't get caught in the trappings of a "new way" of doing youth ministry, and I hope you don't wander down into that dead end either.



KURT'S RESPONSE

Over the course of our long friendship, Marko has described me in all sorts of ways. He's called me Pollyannaish, overly optimistic (a kinder way of saying I'm Pollyannaish), pragmatic, and practical, and said I'm a guy who has never seen a half-empty cup of water. He once asserted that I'm such a fierce utilitarian, I don't see the need for anything that can't be easily implemented in a ministry setting. In this chapter, he reached into his bag of Kurt descriptors and pulled out a new one: chipper. To all of these charges I plead a hearty, "Guilty as charged!" (except being a Pollyanna...that one's just plain mean). I think our differences are what have made our relationship a great example of iron sharpening iron—we see things differently, we lead differently, and we do ministry differently. Marko does things in a thinking sort

of way; almost nothing he does is void of good thinking. I sometimes remember to think as I do things. Ain't nobody got time for too much thinking. There's ministry to get done!

So, as I write these little responses at the end of each chapter, I hope you will sense my deep love and respect for my friend. I'll give some hearty 'Amens' and I'll push back and offer other perspectives, and I'll do all of it hoping this book helps you think about and do the amazing work of youth ministry in such a way that your efforts make a dent for God's kingdom and his glory.

What do I like about this first chapter? Umm...all of it! But I'm especially glad to see one of youth ministry's deepest thinkers willing to cut to the chase and simplify things out of the gate. I couldn't agree more with his mathematical equation (the youth ministry I lead uses a similar one in our training materials) because it's important to have a simple, solid foundation of youth ministry upon which to build.

There are lots of ways to approach youth ministry; please don't let the so-called experts speak more authoritatively into your ministry than they deserve. You know your students, you know your community dynamics, you know your church's theology and values (please tell me you know your church's theology and values!). So take everything you learn in workshops, listen to in podcasts, and read in books like this with a grain of salt.

But Marko's mathematical equation for youth ministry? You can take that to the bank.