



A WOMAN IN YOUTH MINISTRY

HONEST INSIGHT AND LEADERSHIP WISDOM FOR REAL PEOPLE

GINA ABBAS

A Woman in Youth Ministry

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Born in San Diego

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A mi mamá y a mi abuela Julia

Gracias por demostrarme lo que significa ser una mujer fuerte, amable y llena de gracia.

To Tim

You made countless dinners, moved across the country, put the kids to bed, and all so I could finish this book and say yes to being a middle school pastor in Michigan.

I love you.

PRE-RELEASE SAMPLE

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INTRODUCTION

I am a mom. I am a wife. I am a full-time youth worker. Even on the craziest of days when I'm frantically running to and from youth group—sometimes with smashed banana and baby barf in my hair—I love this call to youth ministry. Whether you're single or married, volunteer or paid, youth ministry can be a lifelong calling. You can choreograph a beautiful dance between your life and ministry no matter how busy it gets, how many kids you have (or don't have), or how old you are. If you're 22 or 42 or even 62, you can create space and a rhythm in your week where teenagers, church staff, and ministry colleagues strategically intersect with your everyday life.

And if you're a woman, I want you to know that you can lead a youth ministry and lead it well. You can lead regardless of the varying theological perspectives that exist in regard to women in church leadership. As someone who's experienced some of the best and some of the worst things about being a female in youth ministry, I hope this book inspires my female readers to lead confidently, love your calling, and lean toward the places and people who value your gifts as a youth worker.

I am a youth ministry blogger, and almost every single day I get emails and traffic on my blog (<http://youthleadergina.blogspot.com/>) from women who Google CAN GIRLS BE YOUTH PASTORS? I hope one day this question becomes irrelevant—like it already is for so many of my mainline church friends. But until that day comes, there may be a 15-year-old girl out there somewhere who's like I was back in the late nineties—a girl who needs to see that, yes, women can be youth ministers.

The second most commonly Googled question that sends people to my blog is WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A YOUTH MINISTRY DEGREE? That one makes me laugh. I have a youth ministry degree. Can't you just picture my parents wondering what the heck I was going to use it for? But I am still using it today as an in-the-trenches, this-has-been-my-life's-calling youth pastor. Sometimes I've been called a "youth director" or a "ministry coordinator," but yeah, I'm a youth pastor.

Have you noticed that books about youth ministry tend to be written by seminary professors or youth ministry experts (authors and conference speakers) who aren't living the youth pastor life seven days a week like the rest of us? Most of these authors don't receive angry phone calls from parents or do hourly head counts on a bus trip to somewhere. They don't have to think up games, scramble for small group leaders, run campus clubs, or pick curriculum for the next school year. And another drawback to many of the books about youth ministry today is that most of the authors are men. I want to read a book about being a female youth pastor that was actually written by a female youth pastor. So when I couldn't find a recent one, I decided to write one instead.

Women email me daily asking for my help on finding other women in youth ministry for them to connect with or wanting me to mentor them. I hope that reading this book will be a lot like having me mentor you. Just pretend we're sitting together at a local coffee shop (FAR away from your church so you don't have to worry about anyone overhearing our conversation), and let's get real together. I'll share my stories—the good ones and the difficult ones—and answer many of the questions that women in youth ministry often ask me.

If you're a guy reading this book, then I just have to say: Wow! The girls in youth ministry are going to *love* you! You, dear brother, are going to get an inside look at what's it like for women serving in youth ministry. And as you grow in your understanding of the challenges female youth pastors face, your leadership abilities will also grow. As I share my advice, tips, and wisdom from more than a decade of youth ministry, I know you will glean some helpful insights and leadership tips too.

This book offers a sneak peek into those challenging days of juggling ministry, marriage, and motherhood. It's like my very own behind-the-scenes look at the struggles and triumphs of sticking with the beautiful, messy, challenging call of ministering to teenagers. I've been doing this youth ministry thing since I was a single woman in my 20s. Now I'm an almost-40-year-old mom of three working full time as a middle school pastor. Some days have been full of wow and wonder as I've seen God do some pretty amazing stuff in the lives of teenagers. Other days I want to quit and go work at Target.

I know what it's like to run a youth ministry in both large and small churches. I've worked in super conservative environments and in more liberal to moderate ones too. I've worked where booze was banned and where I was served Margaritas out of a gas can. (Woot woot, Presbys!) You probably have similar stories you could share. So let's get this conversation started.

PRE-RELEASE SAMPLE

CHAPTER ONE

YOUTH PASTORS CAN BE GIRLS? WHY DIDN'T ANYONE TELL ME?!

While walking with my husband through the vendor exhibit hall at several national youth ministry conferences over the years, I've found one thing to be true: Everyone thinks my husband is the youth pastor. They look him in the eye and try to get him to sign up for their youth mission trips or summer camps. He just grins and looks at me as he playfully introduces himself as "the pastor's wife." Then I step forward to grab the brochure and a Tootsie Pop, and lay claim to yet another free, oversized T-shirt. I now have about 50 of these youth ministry-themed T-shirts that only fit my husband. (Apparently these companies believe only large men do youth ministry.) But women in youth ministry are no strangers to this assumption that many people, primarily in conservative Protestant evangelical churches, seem to have that all youth pastors are men.

My daughter Jenna walked into the kitchen one morning while I was pouring her a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. With a look of concern, she said, "Mom, my friends said girls can't be youth pastors." Clearly this is a hot topic if even second graders are discussing it on the playground.

I looked into her curious, bright blue eyes and said, "Well, *I'm* a youth pastor. Am I a girl?"

She replied with a smile and a nod, answering me with a big "Duhhh!" as a little bit of the milk from her cereal bowl ran off her spoon and down her chin.

After pausing for a moment, I asked, "Do you remember Anna, the girl with curly hair in first grade? Guess what *her* mom is." She looked blankly at me as she tried to remember Anna. I reminded her, "You know, my friend Tina's daughter. Well, Anna's mom is a youth pastor too, and *she's* a girl." I could see Jenna connecting the dots.

As we continued our chat over our bowls of cereal, I said, "My friend Carmen, do you know what she is?"

Jenna replied, "A youth pastor!" She smiled from ear to ear.

Taking a sip of my coffee, I asked, "You know Caitlin in Josh's fifth grade class? She belongs to my friend Christina, and guess what...she's a youth pastor too. And what about Mariah?" (One of Jenna's favorite people.) "Can you tell me what she does?"

"She is a youth pastor!" Jenna said with a giddy squeal.

"So, Jenna, can girls be youth pastors?" I asked.

She looked at me eyeball to eyeball and said, "YES!"

I am so thankful to live and serve in a community with so many female youth pastors and youth ministry volunteers around. Three of us youth ministry women have kids in the same public elementary school. I'm blessed to have many friends who serve as real-life examples to my eight-year-old daughter of women serving as youth pastors (or "coordinators" or "directors" or "volunteer youth ministers" or whatever the title may be)!

It's My Normal

I grew up in a congregation where we had a female pastor until I was 15. Since that was my normal, I never knew it wasn't everyone's normal until I went to college. During college I heard God's call to ministry; I knew seminary would be the next step for me. When I told people my plan, the professors I admired most were supportive of me, but I did get a few looks from other students—like I had five heads or something. It never daunted me though because I had my college church and my home church's support 100 percent, and my sense of call was never questioned because of my gender.

Currently I'm serving in a youth ministry position at a church led by a female head pastor. Since female leadership has been such a significant part of my discipleship process with my students, my challenge is to make sure I provide plenty of godly male role models in their lives so they don't think ministry and preaching is only "women's work."

—Carmen Garrigan, PCUSA

If girls aren't meant to be youth pastors, then I guess a lot of us didn't get that memo. If you want to be a woman in youth ministry, clearly there *are* churches that have both men and women in leadership positions who *do* hire women for youth ministry positions. And some of them might even call you a "pastor."

When I think of my daughters and the teenage girls in my own youth group, I can't help but wonder about the limitations some churches and institutions put on women. I understand the well-meaning desire of trying to be faithful to Scripture. There are many well-executed arguments for and against women serving in church leadership. And I am well versed in complementarian theology. I took that class in Bible college. A conservative, evangelical white male taught it. Having been told by male Bible teachers and supervisors how women and men are equal but created for different roles, I leaned into every role that was given to me. Girl Intern. Girl Camp Counselor. Youth Ministry Coordinator. Giving it my best.

But the more I lived into my gender-based "acceptable role" in youth ministry, the more I saw the limitations it placed on gifted women and the damage it did to the relationships between the men and women who were working together in ministry. I wondered and asked if evangelical Christianity was sending an anti-women message. Cedarville University in Ohio, a large private Christian college, made news recently because they have "restricted classes in the women's ministry program—functionally, every Bible class in the fall schedule taught by a woman—to only female students, according to alumni and a university representative"¹ When our daughters and sons are exposed to

only male Bible teachers, and when female Bible teachers are restricted by gender—everyone loses. What message are we speaking into the future of those who come home from second grade asking, **“Mom, can girls be youth pastors?”**

I want my own children to have an expanded view of limitless ministry and Bible-teaching opportunities. Opportunities to use their gifts and learn from each other without gender limitations. We must surround our sons and daughters with an empowering ability to imagine, hear, and discern a call to pastoral ministry. To see men and women, brothers and sisters in Christ, working together to make a difference as they build God’s kingdom and bring hope, faith, and love into the world through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ—not sitting on separate sides of the room or being forced to drive in separate cars.

I didn’t grow up knowing that girls can be youth pastors or Bible teachers. I grew up in a small youth ministry led by guys. I can’t even remember any females helping out too often. If they did, the single guy youth workers and male volunteers probably kept hitting on them and scared them away. The only women I ever saw on church staff were church secretaries and piano players. That is, until I met Lissa on my first day of high school.

I’d flown under the radar during middle school, having never been Miss Popular nor voted “best dressed” or “class clown” by my classmates. So I saw my high school years as my chance to change all of that. I was determined to chart a new course, to do whatever it took to “be cool.” So it was my first day of high school and finally my chance to be whomever I wanted to be had arrived. And then Lissa walked over to me during lunch period. She was a really short girl who looked 11 years old. She had fluffy curly brown hair, a round face, and bright pink cheeks. She was wearing no makeup, pink sweatpants, a pink sweatshirt, and white tennis shoes; and she was holding a lunchbox. Can you imagine my internal dilemma when, gripping her lunchbox tightly, Lissa timidly asked to join my lunch table?

I briefly thought about saying no and sending her on her way. I really wanted to be cool—and Lissa was so not cool. I mean, she looked more like a Care Bear than a ninth grader. And who brings a lunchbox to high school? You’d have thought it was the first day of sixth grade, not freshman year. But at that moment I gave up any attempt at coolness and decided I’d rather choose kindness. It felt better to my soul. And looking back on it now, I know that no one at that lunch table was ever going to be cool anyway.

I grew up in a Christian family, but it was during lunch period on that first day of high school that my faith became my own. While sitting at a table surrounded by green grass, palm trees, and perfect Southern California weather, I decided it was better to follow Jesus. Being “cool” just didn’t seem worth it if it meant I had to hurt people. Living a life of love and grace became something I chose for myself. Except, I went to the other extreme.

Apparently, I’m an all-or-nothing kind of person. I became president of the Christian club at school, signed up to be a student leader in my church youth group, and made my friend Heather cry at lunch one day because I tried to pressure her to accept Jesus so she wouldn’t go to hell. (I was kind of immature when it came to evangelism.) My longtime friend Mark, who’d been crushing on me since middle school, was my senior prom date because my super-cute, college-aged boyfriend had dumped

me because I didn't like him touching my boobs. Basically, I left my mark on high school by being voted "Most likely to become a nun." And so there I was at my prom with Mark who'd been voted "Most likely to become a priest." You could say I wasn't cool—not even a little bit.

Nevertheless, I loved ministry. I loved people and I felt a tug, a calling, and a giftedness toward preaching; yet I had no idea what to do with that. I'd never seen girls preach or lead in the churches I'd attended growing up. But when I was 15, all of that changed. Lissa (who by now had started dressing more like a high schooler and less like a stuffed animal) invited me to her youth group. It was my first time inside a Catholic church. Going to Lissa's youth group was fun, and of course I was a typical ninth grader asking, "What games are we gonna play?" The youth group was similar to mine in some ways, but it was also quite a bit different. Her church hosted several youth dances, and alcohol was allowed (for the grownups) at their annual all-church street festival. Her Jesus-loving church was a lot different than my Jesus-loving church. And I LOVED it.

That's where I met Lissa's youth director, Barbara Brown—the first female youth pastor I'd ever met. She was a mom of high school kids, so she was older than my hip, somewhere-in-his-twenties youth pastor. And there in the parish hall of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in El Cajon, California, while jumping and singing along to "Kriss Kross'll make ya... jump! Jump!" with a pack of sweaty teens is *where I first realized that youth pastors can be girls*. Why didn't anyone ever tell me this? It changed the trajectory of my life. At that moment my view of women in ministry expanded beyond my own conservative evangelical Protestant worldview. It was a game changer. And my friend Lissa has been pulling me forward into new and better ways of thinking and loving ever since. You mean, "Youth pastors can be girls?" Yup.

So yeah, the church can call us "directors," "coordinators," "pastors," or whatever title they prefer. But never forget that whether you're paid, volunteer, or bivocational; whether you're single or married, *God can use you* as a woman in youth ministry. Maybe you're like Lissa, where seeing women serving in youth ministry is a no-brainer. It's all you've known. Perhaps you had a female youth pastor or you grew up not knowing that gender was an issue in ministry. If so, then you obviously don't carry Southern Baptist baggage like I do. Or maybe, like me, you learned from someone a little later in life, like a Barbara or a Lissa, that youth workers can be male or female.

I realize there is a wide spectrum of opinions and biblical interpretations regarding women in ministry leadership, but this isn't a book about that. I'm not trying to change anyone's mind. However, I do want to share my youth ministry journey and pose questions for others to ponder regarding their own calling within their own theological framework. If you aren't sure about your theological view of women in church leadership, it's definitely something you need to wrestle with. There are three main views: hierarchical, complementarian, and egalitarian. You can read a brief description of each of the three below:

Hierarchical

Women and men are created to operate in different spheres of ministry within the church. Women are not permitted to be an elder or deacon, serve Communion, teach men, lead worship, pray or speak in the church service, etc. Women should focus on building ministries for other women and children.

Complementarian

Men and women are partners in every area of ministry together. Women and men are encouraged and equipped to fulfill all ministries and offices of the church with the singular exception of the office of elder, which the Scriptures require to be a male-only office.

Egalitarian

Men and women are partners together in every area of ministry. All ministries and offices in the church are open to men and women. Gender is not a relevant distinction for excluding any person from any church office.²

It's really important to know your own hermeneutic regarding women in leadership, as well as that of the church where you work or volunteer. Theology shapes your day-to-day experience and will impact your opportunities and expectations as a woman in youth ministry. But whatever context you're in and however you lean theologically, you must confidently lean into your calling as a woman in youth ministry. Serve and work in the places and with the people who allow you to be you in all of your giftedness.

Women in conservative evangelical churches and colleges often ask me, "Can I lead as a female in youth ministry?" For better or worse, many churches don't consider leading a youth group to be quite the same thing as leading adults. In many youth ministry paradigms, an age-specific church program for teens is simply the next logical step after they graduate from the children's ministry. Sadly, some in senior church leadership positions (thankfully, not all) view a church youth group as little more than a donut-and-Mountain-Dew-filled holding tank for pre-teens and teens until they reach adulthood—with some Jesus, summer camps, mission trips, decision cards, and confirmation classes tossed in, of course. And because youth ministry positions aren't considered "senior leadership" or executive staff, conservative evangelical churches with a complementarian hermeneutic for figuring out gender roles in ministry do welcome women to serve and lead in youth ministry.

Churches from complementarian theological perspectives are hiring women and recruiting female volunteers to oversee youth ministry small groups, girls' ministry, campus ministry, curriculum development, or to work on staff as an assistant youth pastor with a male youth pastor as the lead. Women with a hierarchical or complementarian theological view of women in ministry are likely to work mostly or even exclusively with teenagers and staff of their own gender, and there is no shortage of ministry opportunities to do so. And if your church is egalitarian in its theology, well then you're probably already leading your own youth ministry without any gender limitations and are enjoying much more equality in ministry than many of your sisters in Christ do.

So my answer to the question "Can I lead as a female in youth ministry?" is women can and do lead in all kinds of youth ministry settings, with varying titles and many different types of roles.

As I touched on before, in a majority of churches the youth ministry falls under the children's and youth ministry departments; therefore, it allows—and needs—both men and women to serve on these teams. Usually there is a Christian education director, educational pastor, or associate pastor of some kind overseeing the teen and children's ministries. This is especially true in larger churches. It's also true in churches that haven't yet adopted or intentionally integrated their teenagers and kids

into the life and rhythm of the church at large, and still keep tons of separate programming going. Many churches need a large and diverse youth ministry staff. The need for men and women to lead, volunteer, and pastor male and female teenagers still exists in every kind of church everywhere. Even in the conservative Southern Baptist churches I have known and loved, they always had an awareness of the need to have women on their youth ministry team. If you are called to youth ministry, you are going to find a way to serve and love on teenagers. Look around. There are women in youth ministry everywhere.

Maybe there is a 15-year-old girl like me who needs to see that she can be a youth pastor. Will you lead the charge to show our girls and boys and conservative evangelical friends that there are plenty of women, paid and unpaid, serving in youth ministry? Will you step outside of your denominational networks and mix it up with others from different perspectives so they can see what you already know to be true? For many of you, women serving in youth ministry was never a question, never an issue—you've always known that #GirlsCan—and others need to hear that.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Ruth Moon, "Christian College Solidifies Complementarian Stance," Gleanings: Theology, *Christianity Today*, posted March 21, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/march/christian-college-solidifies-complementarian-cedarville.html>.

² Mark Driscoll, "FAQ: Women and Ministry," Pastor Mark Driscoll Blog, posted September 20, 2011, <http://pastormark.tv/2011/09/20/faq-women-and-ministry>.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Did you always know that women can be youth workers? What was your experience of and/or exposure to women doing youth ministry?
2. What denominational affiliation did you grow up in (or not) and how has that shaped your view of women in ministry?
3. When did you first sense a call to serve as a paid or volunteer youth worker?
4. Is there a particular person who inspired you to want to serve in youth ministry?
5. Did you already know about the three theological views of women in church leadership?
6. What is your view of women in ministry? Is it the same or different than the church where you serve now or the church you grew up in?
7. If you are or were a Bible college or seminary student, what is the view of women in ministry at that educational institution?
8. How does your theology of women in leadership and gender roles in marriage inform and influence your ministry, your relationships, and your expectations?

PRE-RELEASE SAMPLE

ABOUT GINA ABBAS

Gina has been a woman in youth ministry a little longer than The Tower of Terror has been open at Disneyland's California Adventure Park. She lives with her three kids and Star Wars loving husband in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Gina is the 7 and 8 middle school pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church.

ORDER INFORMATION

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