

Lessons from Jesus' (Youth) Ministry

By Jeb Egbert

An essential goal for ministry in our congregations is to minister to youth (children, teens and young adults). But what is youth ministry? And what are the characteristics of an effective youth minister?

One author suggests that effective youth ministry involves “the purposive, determined and persistent quest by both natural and supernatural means to expose, transmit or otherwise share with youth God’s message of good news which is central to the Christian faith.” The goal of this work is “to cultivate a life transformation of youth by the power of the Holy Spirit that they might be conformed to the revealed will of God as expressed in scripture, and chiefly in the person of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹

Effective youth ministry encourages and enables youth to embrace Jesus’ person where, through their union with Christ, they come to share in the life and love of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In communion with God, through the Holy Spirit, these young disciples begin to embrace and express the priorities, passions and patterns of Jesus, who is advancing the work of the Father in our world today.

Youth ministry is thus Jesus’ ministry on earth today, to and through young disciples of Jesus. In the Worldwide Church of God, we seek to work in partnership with Jesus in this ministry by embracing Jesus’ priorities and passions and following the patterns of his discipling ministry. The core values and strategies of Jesus’ discipling ministry are set forth for us in the record of the four Gospels of the New Testament. There we see Jesus seeking the lost, building believers and equipping workers during the 3½ years of his discipling ministry on earth. It’s interesting and instructive to observe that his ministry involved children, teens and young adults (many of the 12 original disciples may have been older teens

This article is provided for pastors, youth leaders, youth workers and other congregational leaders to assist them in building youth ministries in and through their congregations. This is the first article in a series on youth ministry being provided by Jeb Egbert and Ted Johnston, co-directors of the Worldwide Church of God national youth ministry development team. In the Worldwide Church of God, “youth ministry” is ministry to and through children, teens and college-age young adults. The mission of that ministry is to win, build and equip young discipling followers of Jesus. We encourage you to share this article with those who minister to youth in your congregations.

when Jesus first called them).

And so we note that youth ministry focuses on Jesus—partnering with him, with the goal of becoming like him. As one of the first disciples of Jesus, the apostle John, wrote, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus walked” (1 John 2:6). The result of walking with Jesus is that we become more and more like him. As Jesus taught his disciples, “Everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40).

This life transformation is not a matter of the training of our flesh to merely mimic Jesus; rather it is the transformation of our lives as Jesus lives in us through the Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul noted, “I am crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). The goal of youth ministry is to see children, teens and young adults possessing and expressing the life of Christ. As they do, they become less self-centered and progressively more Christ-centered, no longer seeking their own fleshly wills, but the will of Jesus alive in and through them.

Doug Stevens writes about this transformation in Christ: “When we accept the salvation offered us in Christ, we are saying yes to the invitation to

¹ M. Lamport, “What Is Youth Ministry?” *Christian Educational Journal* 16, no. 3 (spring 1996): 61-70.

become like him, to be remolded into the image of the perfect humanity of Jesus.”²

Notice the sequence: He inhabits us. We are transformed. “Our character” begins to look less like “our” character and more like Jesus’ character. We take on his priorities. Our actions begin to mirror his; our doing stems from our being in Christ, who is our life. In this life, we “walk as Jesus would walk.” This life in and for Jesus is the goal of youth ministry, and it is also the dominant characteristic of effective youth ministers. Effective youth ministers are passionate, committed disciples of Jesus who are committed to following Jesus’ person, priorities, passions and patterns in ministering to and through young disciples of Jesus.

A different model

This discipling approach to youth ministry is a different model for many. Several authors point out that those involved in youth ministry are often considered to be involved in “ministry-lite.” It’s not the real stuff. As a result, youth ministry is often not really ministry at all, but simply youth activity. Certainly, youth ministry appropriately includes lots of youthful, exuberant activity such as games, sports, music, dancing and the like. But these activities are not the goal—rather they are a means to an end, a way to connect to youth in order to advance the ultimate purpose, which is to see youth become fully-functioning disciples of Jesus who, in turn, minister to others in Jesus’ name.

Our model for youth ministry also emphasizes the personal characteristics of the youth minister. Rather than being a coordinator of activities, youth ministers are, themselves, vibrant disciples of Jesus with a passion for Jesus and for youth and a desire and willingness to participate actively with Jesus in ministering to and through youth. Our goal is to see such youth leaders and youth workers selected, mentored, equipped and ultimately released for powerful, dynamic ministry. In pursuing this goal, we seek to emulate Jesus’ model of (youth)

ministry.

Fundamentally, youth ministry is often where God chooses to work. It is the “fertile soil” of the parable of the sower. George Barna’s findings in 1995 that “about three quarters of all people who have consciously, intentionally and personally chosen to embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior did so before their 18th birthday,”³ have not significantly changed in the years since.

I recently attended a conference where those sitting around the table with me were expected to share when the first seeds of God’s intervention in their lives were planted. To my amazement, every single person at the table commented that those seeds were planted by the age of 8! They were at the conference some two to three decades later to learn more about how to engage in seed planting of their own.

Youth ministry is not for those who “have nothing better to do.” This is serious. So much so that when the disciples believed that Jesus certainly had better things to do than to spend time with children, we are told that Jesus “was indignant” (Mark 10:14).

So we seek to embrace Jesus’ person and to understand, embrace and emulate the priorities, passions and patterns of Jesus’ discipling ministry as it pertains to ministry to and through youth. As we study the Gospels, we find six essential characteristics of Jesus’ discipling ministry. These characteristics, described below, are the essential *foundations* of an effective youth ministry, and they are also the foundational personal characteristics of effective youth ministers.

Christ-centered

The focus of the person leading ministry, and the focus of the ministry itself, must be Christ-centered. Who is the person of Jesus? It is imperative that the one leading youth ministry knows Jesus. Not knows *of* him—knows *him*. This is the starting point of youth ministry. This is the foundation.

This foundational element includes having the

² Doug Stevens, *Called to Care* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

³ George Barna, *Generation Next* (Ventura: Regal, 1995).

proper understanding of who God is and what he has done for us. Knowing God's love for us is so rich that he gave his greatest treasure for our redemption has enormous implications to our ministry. It is only when we grasp his work on our behalf that we become overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude and joy and a deep desire to share the same with others.

Contrast this to an approach that would see God as only a lawgiver and enforcer. If the youth leader has a perspective of God that tilts in this direction, this philosophy will permeate the approach to ministry. Conversely, if the youth leader's view of God is one of an indifferent, absentee father, that message will come through as well. Either extreme creates a crack in the youth ministry foundation.

In the first two chapters of Ephesians, we learn the following about who God is and what he has done for us. He blessed us (1:3); he *chose* us (1:4); he predestined us to be adopted as his children (1:5); he freely gave us his grace (1:6); he redeemed us through his blood (1:7); he forgave our sins (1:7); he made known the mystery of his will (1:19); he sealed us in Christ (1:13); he gave us an inheritance (1:14); he has great love for us (2:4); he made us alive (2:5); he saved us (2:8).

What sort of God do we serve? Youth leaders should have an intimate relationship with and proper concept of our incredibly generous God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Prayerfully-dependent

A growing youth ministry will be led by a youth minister who depends on God. That dependence includes a vibrant prayer life. Such prayer flows out of being Christ-centered. In prayer we enter the prayer life of Jesus in his union with the Father—we experience the wonder of the life and love of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We connect with the rhythms of Jesus' heart in his dependence on the Father.

If there is a biblical character for whom one could make a case for a *lesser* need for prayer, that character would be Jesus. Fully God and fully human, Jesus clearly was superior to the rest of

humanity. Yet he prayed perhaps more ardently, more consistently, and more passionately than any other biblical character. He modeled "prayer without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). Jesus prayed at his baptism (Luke 3:21). He prayed at his temptation (Luke 4:1). He prayed when he was very busy—often the time when most people abandon prayer (Mark 1:35). He prayed before choosing the 12 (Luke 6:12). He prayed before commissioning them (Matt 9:36-38).

Jesus sought an intimate relationship with his Father! It was one of the overarching operating principles of his life. Not a mechanistic sort of prayer, but a communicative relationship that became so intense on one occasion that "his sweat was like drops of blood" (Luke 22:44). Jesus modeled an ongoing, prayerful, intense dependence on God.

Youth ministry leaders need to focus on modeling this characteristic of Jesus in their own lives. Prayerful dependence will be a hallmark of healthy youth ministry.

Word-directed

Whether Scripture, the prompting of the Holy Spirit or the message found in the lives and testimony of other believers, an openness to receiving and obeying God's Word is another foundational hallmark of the youth minister. Jesus was and is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He is the Word of Life. And he sends the Holy Spirit, who speaks God's Word, including his Word recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus modeled the importance of Scripture in his (youth) ministry. Over 90 times he quoted from the Old Testament. The contexts in which he did included his own learning (Luke 2:46); to resist Satan (Luke 4:1-13); in his daily action (Luke 4:18-21); in his decision-making process (Matt 4:13-15); to guide his priorities (Mark 1:38) and in training his disciples (Luke 8:9-10).

Unfortunately, many in youth ministry have a shallow relationship with Scripture. If the Bible does not confirm a nudging of the Holy Spirit in their lives, something is amiss. Those leading youth ministry must therefore be grounded in the

Word of truth (John 17:17).

Furthermore, young people have been immersed in a postmodern educational system and culture. To many, truth is relativistic. The sands of belief shift on the basis of circumstances and how one feels at a given moment. But Jesus is *the* Rock. His Word illuminates our paths and gives sight to a spiritually blind world.

Having a proper concept of the Triune God, being prayerfully dependent and ensuring the primacy of God's Word are three essential foundational elements of the character of Jesus. Jesus modeled those three foundational characteristics, and these in turn shaped his priorities.

Grace-based

Jesus' priorities flowed from his person in union with God. Instead of approaching his priorities in a checklist fashion, they were naturally born out of the depth of the very person he was. A major priority that characterized Jesus' ministry was the creation of an environment permeated by grace expressed as unconditional love. He came for love. He lived a life of love. He died for love. He is love (1 John 4:16).

Through his personal grace-filled presence, Jesus consistently created a loving environment. When he healed the leper in Mark 1:41, he reached out and touched him. This evidences his self-sacrificing love. Touching a leper would defile him under Jewish law, but he had less concern for self and for religious formalities than for the desire to express compassion for an afflicted man.

In Luke 7:13 Jesus sees a widow who has lost her son. "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.'" When he sees the multitudes in Matthew 9:36, he has compassion on them. In John 11:3, 5, 35-36 we find that he loved his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha deeply. Even with respect to a city, in Luke 19:41-42 we read, "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it..." Such compassion didn't leave him as he was dying on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus said that the priority of creating an

environment of love would be a sign of his disciples. "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). The question then for youth leaders is, do we help create an atmosphere of love? Is that love unconditional? Does it differentiate on the basis of any reason, or is it like that of Jesus—open and generous to all?

Young people often feel cut off. Josh McDowell notes that almost half of today's young people have lived through their parents' divorce; 63 percent of youth live in households in which both parents work outside the home, and teenagers spend an average of 3½ hours alone every day.⁴ Ron Hutchcraft writes "In my thirty-three years of working with young people, I have never known so many to feel so alone—so willing to do anything to keep from feeling alone for a little while."⁵

Do we as youth leaders reach into the lives of our students to develop deep, abiding, unconditional loving relationships? Does our congregation serve as a beacon of warmth to a young person who may have endured the icy chill of a culture of isolation during the course of the week? If the student is not present over a period of a week or two, can he or she count on a phone call of loving concern by the youth leader or pastor?

Community-focused

What kind of a group image did Jesus work to create within his group of disciples? It is likely that many initially came to the group for the free food or to receive or to see a miracle. But Jesus consistently elevated his group—building within the participants a community that transcended a focus on competing, selfish needs and concerns. Some who came to the group with a different vision were ultimately offended by Jesus' agenda. But Jesus first met them "where they were"—for example, he fed the hungry (in John 6 he fed 5,000 men, not to mention women and children). But having met their need for physical food, he invited

⁴ Josh McDowell, *The Disconnected Generation*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 2000).

⁵ Ron Hutchcraft, *The Battle for a Generation* (Chicago: Moody, 1996).

them to go deeper—to begin to embrace the true focus of his group—the person of Jesus. And so Jesus introduces them to “the bread of life.” He said to them, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v. 53). “On hearing it, many of his disciples said ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’” (v. 60). “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (v. 66).

In other words, those who came for the free food quickly learned that there was much more than some kind of circus going on. And those who were drawn to return did so because of the spiritual menu that Jesus had prepared.

The Jews were looking for a Messiah, preferably one with a sword who would free them from the Romans. There was little interest in the message of repentance and transformation that Jesus brought. But bring it he did: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” (Matt 4:17).

Does the youth leader create a clear community-of-Jesus focus within the youth group? As Dave Garda writes, “When our vision for youth growth moves beyond popularity to life transformation, we must understand that God gives the increase. Jesus came full of grace and truth, clear in his message of hope and purposeful in his actions. His vision rallied others to expect the supernatural as a normal way of life.”⁶

How does such a healthy community focus occur within your youth group? And does that focus serve as a magnet? Do kids want to come back, not just for the cookies and games, but for the gospel? And does the youth group extend beyond itself to share the excitement for the gospel back within the congregation and out to the community beyond the church?

Mission-driven

As we have discovered, the priorities of loving others unconditionally and sacrificially as well as creating a healthy community focus spring naturally from the person of Jesus. This leads to a

third area of emphasis that Jesus modeled and then summarized in the Great Commission. This priority is one of reaching out to the lost with an intentional agenda of bringing them to him.

When reading through the Gospels, one can’t help but conclude that Jesus intentionally moved through the community so as to ensure he was in the crossroads of people’s lives. Many of these people he did not know. While he clearly spent a significant amount of time with the disciples to teach, mentor and equip them for their own ministry, thousands of people came into contact with him. Of course, the disciples comprised a learning community who learned by being in the presence of Jesus and watching him as he reached out and talked, touched, healed or taught others.

A youth minister following the model that Jesus demonstrated must be outreach-oriented, just as Jesus was. He or she must be intentional about finding ways to contact and develop relationships with those who don’t know Christ. This includes those who attend church as well as those who don’t.

Conclusion

There are hundreds of resources and curricula available for those involved in youth ministry. But if the foundation is not sound, all the programs and resources in the world will be of negligible impact. We need look no further than the ministry of our Lord and Savior to determine how his character shaped his priorities. Jesus is the model. Everything else is supplemental.

This may appear to be daunting, especially for those involved with youth ministry where only one or two youth are involved. But Jesus went beyond giving us a model. He also left us this promise: “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age!*’” (Matt 28:18-20).

⁶ David J. Garda, *Foundations—Growing a Healthy Youth Ministry* (Elburn, IL: Sonlife Ministries, 1999).