

Biblical Principles of Youth Ministry

When we think or talk about establishing a youth group, it is important to begin by asking the question, “What is it that the Lord desires of us in this ministry?” We must ask the question, “Has He perhaps already given us a model for ministry and a structure that we can, by His grace, reproduce in our church? Our goal is not to grow a youth group, but to see the first century church ideals and convictions reproduced in the context of twenty-first century teens. Our God has already given us everything pertaining to life and godliness including the principles and models of ministry in the scriptures.

MODELS OF MINISTRY. These models are mainly about the overall scope and structure of the local church, but they also contain sound principles for ministries within the church. All we need is to look to the Scriptures. For example, Ephesians 4:11-12 says,

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (NASB) Eph. 4:11-12

In your question, you stated that you already had administration people and Bible teachers. The first question then that you want to ask is, “Will they fit into a structure of equipping students for the work of the ministry?” Are they equipping these young saints to do the work of the ministry? The second question is whether there are some missing pieces in your overall ministry leadership structure. Let us take a closer look at each one of these questions.

ARE THEY EFFECTIVE NOW? The first question asks whether your current leaders are actually being effective at



equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry. This is every leader’s goal. It is called making disciples. I like to use the phrase “student ministry” versus “youth group.” It has a completely different emphasis. “Student ministry” is much more purposeful, active, engaging, and spiritual. It carries with it the idea of students mentoring for character, instructed for doctrine, and equipped for competency so that they will engage in effective ministry. The leaders (i.e.

adults, mentors, pastors, leaders) are there to model, mentor, and equip these young ministers in Christ-like character, sound doctrine, and effective methods to reach lost peers and make disciples of their own (Matthew 28:18-20). This is clearly the ministry model of Jesus Himself. According to many scholars and experts on the life of Christ, somewhere around half of His original disciples were teenagers when He began His discipling ministry to them. This was the original “student ministry” or “youth group.”

The Apostle Paul gives us a good picture of this kind of effective mentoring ministry in 2 Timothy 2:2 when he says to Timothy, “The things that you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Here is the application for us in student ministry today. Where are the spiritually gifted leaders and mentors? Is there at least one leader like Paul? Is there at least one like Timothy? Are there some adults whose lives look so much like Christ that it would be worth while for all the other adults and students to be mentored or discipled to look like, act like, love like, and serve like them? These are your spiritual leaders. Build the ministry structure around men and women of character like these. If they are not there already, either pray to the Lord of the Harvest for more or begin by mentoring those around you to be these men and women. This brings us to our second question.

Look at these men and women of character. What is their gifting and where is their calling in the body of Christ? It is all going to be relational. However, what is it that they bring to the ministry? Here is a list of five different kinds of leaders from Ephesians 4:11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Some theologians lump the last two together and make them into a Pastor/Teacher. We will keep it simple for now and consider them separately. Follow me for just a moment. An apostle was and is a sent one. He is someone who starts things. This is the classic Big “L” leader: a leader of leaders. A prophet, I believe, is one who leads through a preaching ministry. He is one who tells it like it is according to God’s revealed truth without concern for his own comfort or safety. They can be just a little “in your face” at times, but all in love, for the glory of God

and for the souls of men and women. Evangelists are those whose special calling is to effectively share the gospel with unreached people as well as equip the saints to do the same. The word for “Pastor” is the same word as “Shepherd” in the Greek. Pastors are those with a shepherd’s heart, who have a deep concern for the spiritual health and welfare of the people. They are caregivers. They make people feel safe and cared for. Teachers are called to equip the saints for sound doctrine with the outcome of sound living.

Now let us bring this all back into a twenty-first century, student ministries context. The goal is making disciples and seeing the power of God unleashed in and through the lives of these young people. The young people are not on their own! God has already given them “everything pertaining to life and godliness.” He has also given them some leaders through whom the character of Christ, sound doctrine, and skills in ministry are shown.

Is there an apostle? Is there a leader of leaders? Is there a servant of God (not self-serving) who is willing to mentor mentors, lead leaders, and disciple disciplers? Is this you? He is all about reproducing himself in the lives of other leaders, his character, his doctrine, and his ministry skills. This is the directional leader. He is a risk taker. He is the one responsible to set the direction and start a movement. He is the one who will identify men and women of character and gifting in order to establish the structure of the ministry. He pays close attention to his own growth in Christ: in character, doctrine, and ministry competency.

Are there any prophets? They bring passion to the ministry. They are consumed with the love of Christ and consumed with a love for people and it shows up in their personality, especially when they teach. In fact, they find it hard to just teach, they have to preach with passion.

Is there an evangelist? Even if there is not, I believe that it is the job of every leader to “do the work of an evangelist” just like Paul told Timothy, who was a lead pastor and teacher but not an evangelist. Keep the passion for reaching the lost hot and fresh in the life of the ministry.

Let’s talk about a pastor. It sounds like you already have the deep desire of a true shepherd. Your heart cries out that more students would come to know and love Christ. You

have a deep concern for spiritual health in the ministry.

Finally, who are your teachers? I am going to give you some quick fixes here in a little bit but I wanted to lay the foundation from the Scriptures! Understand that God works through people, not programs and structures. The greatest gift that you or any adult in student ministries could ever give to the ministry is to be a man or woman of God living out his or her spiritual gifting in the context of the church! Principles are what are of greatest importance, not models or structures of ministry. Remember the life of Christ! He had no office, no title, no salary, no formal job description, no regular meeting time or place, no programs but He shook the earth with eleven men! In the book of Acts, these men were given a divine structure. Therefore, it was not their administrative skills that shook the earth. What they had was the power of the risen Lord, character, sound doctrine, and spiritual gifts or skills of ministry.

The purpose of the ministry that I lead is “To be a community of fully devoted followers of Christ who win the lost, establish the foundation, and equip them to serve Jesus as Great Commission, Great Commandment Christians.” Over the past 7 years, I have had the joy of wrestling with these scriptures, distilling these biblical principles, and working out a model of ministry in order to implement them into a student ministry. The team and I are in process! The actual model of ministry will depend on your unique gifting, as well as the spiritual gift mix represented in your leadership. A great thing to remember is to enjoy and excel in the areas in which God has gifted you and to recruit others in the areas of your deficiencies. Remember, this is all about the glory of God and the souls of men and women. It is not about you. Let us take a brief look at the structure of one student ministry. I want to begin with a biblical job description.

YOUTH PASTOR’S JOB DESCRIPTION. All of the duties and responsibilities of the Youth Pastor can be broken down into three main functions. He is to lead, love or shepherd, and teach. Each one of these functions is clearly founded in the Bible. I believe that each of these functions are applicable for all pastors but in this area of student ministries, these functions will be placed in the context of ministering to 13

to 18 year old students.

In his function as a **leader**, the youth pastor will be responsible for the following:

1. He is to develop a clear, biblical, culturally relevant, and transferable philosophy of ministry. (i.e. win the lost, establish the believers, and equip them to serve.)
2. He is to develop, communicate, and implement a strategic plan for ministry that is consistent with the biblically based philosophy of ministry.
3. He is responsible to cast vision, recruit, and equip ministry team members.
4. He is to work closely with parents and view them as teammates, be patient with them, and serve them as a resource in bringing students to maturity in Christ.
5. He is responsible to lead the entire congregation in their approach to ministering to students.
6. He is to evaluate and make changes in the overall programming of the ministry to ensure that it continues to meet its biblical mandates.
7. He is responsible to ensure that each student is given the opportunity to discover his or her own unique gift-mix and to begin to develop and use those gifts within the context of this local body of believers.

In his function as **lover or shepherd**, the youth pastor will be responsible for the following:

1. He is to pray for and establish an atmosphere of love within the ministry.
2. He is to communicate through the context of relationships, love and acceptance for the students.
3. He is responsible to ensure that there are opportunities for counseling, discipleship, and mentoring for students in the ministry.
4. He must make sure that consistent communication is taking place within the ministry between adult ministry team members and students.
5. He is to ensure that biblical church discipline be

carried out in a timely and sensitive manner.

In his function as **teacher**, the youth pastor will be responsible for the following:

1. He is to clearly and accurately communicate the Word of God in a culturally relevant way with the goal of life change.
2. He is to ensure that the ministry has a biblical identity or understanding of itself. (“Student Ministry” versus “Youth Group” . . . First Century Church ideals and convictions in the context of twenty-first century students)
3. He is to ensure that the ministry has a proper concept of who Jesus the Christ is.
4. He is to reproduce, equip, empower, and offer positive feedback to emerging teachers and preachers.

ADULT MINISTRY TEAM. The most important place where this is worked out is in the context of the Adult Ministry Team (AMT). Start by mentoring the AMT. At least once a month sit down for approximately two hours together and refresh them in Christ. Next, remind them of their role in ministry. Defer to some of their strengths in administration and organization as you collectively plan events and organize the ministry. Make it a point to set up one-on-one lunch appointments with every adult male leader. Have your wife meet once a month with all of the adult female leaders together over breakfast or lunch. These times are for personal accountability and shepherding. This is where we encourage, support, love, and sometimes even correct. This aspect of the ministry is probably the most important thing we do. It does not have the immediate rush that a large outreach program gives, but this is where we are really going to change the world as we reproduce ourselves in the lives of these leaders.

The AMT must have a couple of basic responsibilities. They are the real heroes of the ministry. They are the foot soldiers who serve the Lord from their volunteer time by mentoring young lives for the Kingdom of God. They function in many less visible yet necessary roles as van drivers,

event organizers, counselors, etc. However, their true value in ministry is found in their mentoring role. They are far more than chaperones or sponsors. The members of the AMT are world changers. They are disciple makers of men and women for the Kingdom. They do this through the following ways.

1. **BE MENTORED:** Each Adult Ministry Team member is expected to be in accountable relationship with the Youth Pastor or one of his team members, i.e. wife, intern, etc.
2. **PURSUE THE HEART OF CHRIST:** You cannot take anyone beyond where you have gone. AMT members are expected to be pursuing intimacy with Christ more than any other thing. They are expected to experience continued spiritual growth.
3. **PEER MINISTRY:** We must not ask anyone to do what we are not willing to do. We ask students to go out and make disciples of their peers. We must be willing to go out of our comfort zones and model what it looks like to make disciples of our peers.
4. **SHEPHERDS:** Each AMT member is expected to take on a specific group of students from the ministry and act as their spiritual caregiver. This is to ensure that each student know the love of Christ from a godly adult. Every student on our roll is in a shepherding group. This is so each student knows he or she is loved. Contacting students is crucial. This can be done through post cards, phone calls, one-on-ones, or personal emails.
5. **MENTORS:** Each AMT member will have as one of their goals to deeply impact students for the kingdom in a mentoring capacity. One of the primary methods I use is through a discipleship group (D-group). D-groups are small groups, one-on-one, one on two or one on three, for example, with the purpose of mentoring for character. D-groups are made up exclusively of either all girls or all guys. Our D-groups follow a simple, biblical model that we call CANS (community, adoration, nurture, service). It is the role of the D-group leader to ensure that

there is a growing sense of Community, that they are practicing Adoration of the Lord, that they are being Nurtured by the Word, and that they are moving in God's blessing to bless others in Service.

6. **PROBLEM SOLVERS:** Our adults are the ones who are to be willing to jump into conflict and difficulty and minister the grace of God in challenging situations. They are to be trustworthy and to be able to deal with sensitive information with godliness and tact.

STUDENT MINISTRY TEAM. I believe that healthy biblical student ministry is not adults who minister to students only, but students who know, understand, and give themselves in ministry. Our desire is that all students be given the opportunity to explore their spiritual gifting and to grow in the expression of that gifting within the context of the student's ministry team whether that is in a formal or informal role.

The Student Ministry Team is a formalized opportunity for students to grow exponentially in their understanding of ministry and spend themselves for the sake of the Kingdom in the context of the student ministry. It is made up of growing, godly, motivated senior high students. Their term runs from August through May. They are selected each year based on the following criteria. They must be **FAITHFUL** to the ministry, **AVAILABLE** to serve, **TEACHABLE** in their character, and **RESPONSIVE** to the Holy Spirit and to the authority of the established godly leadership in the ministry. Their role is as follows:

1. **GROWING AND ACCOUNTABLE:** They are expected to be in the process of being mentored whether it be as part of a D-group or in a one-on-one relationship with one of the AMT. They are directly accountable to the Student Ministries Pastor. It is his role to mentor and equip them into visionary ministers.
2. **SERVICE:** They are expected to serve in a sacrificial manner whether that be cleaning out church vans, vacuuming the youth room, making it to band practice, decorating the room for an outreach event, etc. They are to do this "as unto the Lord."

3. **PROGRAM AND PLANNING:** These students are expected to understand our biblical mandates to win the lost, establish the believers, and equip them to serve Jesus as Great Commission, Great Commandment Christians. They are given great freedom in planning events and activities in order to fulfill the mandates of winning the lost and establishing the believers.
4. **ORGANIC MINISTRY:** Student Ministry Team is expected to look for opportunities to do "peer share" (i.e. evangelism) and "peer care" (i.e. prayer, encouragement, contacting, etc). They are to understand that this is our ultimate goal as fully devoted followers of Christ. We are not to focus on the program of "doing church" we are to operate and function in a Spirit led manner to "be the church."
5. **MEETINGS:** Student Ministry Team begins each year of service and training in August with the AMT/SMT get-a-way. They will continue to meet throughout the school year at a minimum of once a month in conjunction with the Adult Ministry Team in order to catch God's vision for the ministry, be equipped with ministry skills, dream dreams, and pray.

CONCLUSION. I'm confident that if you spend your time in prayer, in the Scriptures, evaluating your current ministry team players and begin to mentor them beginning with character, that the outcome will be a ministry that truly pleases the Lord and rocks the world for the cause of Christ. Let your programs be flexible. They are not of primary importance. What are important are the glory of God and the souls of men and women. It could take two to five years to get to where you want to be with this ministry so relax and enjoy the process. Build on biblical principles instead of fads, hype, and shallow youth culture. Study the life of Christ in the gospels and watch how He did ministry and mentored His disciples. Pour over the pastoral epistles, I Timothy, II Timothy, and Titus. Watch what Timothy's mentor taught him about leadership, character, and ministry. It is not a quick fix or easy at the outset, but you will be

refreshed and confident in the end. “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.”