



Long-Range Planning and Youth Ownership

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How do we plan long-range?

Questions 28 and 92 address the issue of developing a game plan for youth ministry. We will look at the related question of planning long-range for specific events and programs/activities.

The assumption is that you have already set some long-range goals; you have an answer to the question, What do we want youth to learn, experience, and do from the time they enter youth ministry until they graduate, in order for them to grow in faith and discipleship? As you plan, look ahead to see what national, conference, and district youth events are scheduled in the next year or two. These events can become pegs on which to hang your planning. Remember to block out time for mission trips, work camps, and other service activities, as well as camping, canoe trips, and so forth.

Planning for specific events or programs/activities becomes an intermediate step in reaching your long-range goals. For major events, such as a national youth event, a mission trip, and similar activities, begin planning a year ahead. Here are some steps to follow in your long-range planning:

- Begin publicity with your youth group and congregation. Let them know about the event, what it is, and how attending it will benefit them.
- Gather registrations for the event. If you are planning a trip where you work out your own housing along the way, begin working with local churches to arrange for your youth group to sleep in their basements.

- Work on fundraising for the trip. National youth events, mission trips, and work camps are more expensive than short trips around the local area or conference and district events. Begin planning early for fundraising so that you do not have to focus on this at the last minute and overwhelm both the youth and the congregation with too many fundraisers too close together.
- Work out your travel plans. Does the church have a van? Have you reserved it well in advance? Or does the conference or district have a bus going to a national event? Do you need to charter a bus for a major trip? Can you depend on parents to help provide transportation?

It is also important to plan ahead for local programs and activities, although you may not have to begin planning as far ahead as for national events. Let's assume, for purposes of illustration, that you want to begin a Bible study for older youth who are beginning to drop out of the youth program. Here are some things you need to consider:

- Why do you want to begin a Bible study? What will be the hook for this Bible study that will make it unique and cause older youth to want to attend?
- Who will be the target audience for the study? If the target audience is older youth, you will plan the content and approach differently from the way you would plan for junior highs (see Question 42).
- What will be the content of the study? What resources are available for such a study?
- Who will lead the study?
- How will you promote the group with your older youth? Simply putting a notice in the church bulletin will not draw the people you most want. You will need to promote and recruit: write letters and e-mails, make phone calls, talk to youth personally whenever you happen to run into them.
- How will you maintain the group? This is a key question we often ignore in our long-range planning. We start a new group with a lot of excitement and hope and then expect it to continue on its own momentum. Groups, particularly new groups with an audience as fragile as older youth, need a lot of nurture and maintenance. How will you plan to build on the enthusiasm of the beginning to keep the group alive and growing?



How do we work out a plan but still give youth ownership and get them involved?

The question assumes that long-range planning is primarily the work of adult leaders. This is, in my view, a correct assumption. Adult leadership will provide the continuity and vision for long-range planning in youth ministry. The question also assumes that youth need to be involved in planning so that they have ownership in what happens. So, the question really means, How do we balance the two so that youth have ownership and we have a coherent long-range plan?

Begin by having youth represented on the planning team. This does not have to be a lot of youth but enough so that youth concerns can be heard. After all, youth know a lot about who they are, what their life is like, and what questions and concerns they have. This does not mean that youth are allowed to dictate everything that happens, simply that they have a voice in developing the plan.

Then, at intervals, take the plan in progress to a youth meeting and say, “Here’s where we think we’re going, and here’s why we think we’re going there. How does that sound to you?” Again, the idea is not to have an up-or-down vote but to get responses, suggestions, and ideas from the total youth group. This broadens the base of ownership and makes it more likely that the plan will be successful when you put it into practice—*if*, of course, you really listen to what the youth are saying and take their concerns seriously. That does not mean you have to adopt every suggestion they make. It does mean youth need to know that you are taking them seriously and that they will be able to see some of what they suggest in the final plan.

As a part of the planning process, offer youth choices. Choices always have parameters. Do not ask, “What would you like to study?” Ask instead, “As a part of dealing with decision making, would you prefer we consider issues about science and ethics, or ethics in public life?” This gives youth a choice, within parameters. The key is that planners will have a goal in mind that, in this case, deals with ethics and decision making. The learning goals are the same for either forum. Youth have a real choice, but it is within a framework that fits a long-range plan.

How much planning is too much to give over to youth themselves?

It depends. (Don't you love that straight-forward, decisive answer?) It depends, first of all, on the group itself. How mature are the youth? How willing are they to work hard at planning and to take seriously all the things that go into developing a game plan for youth ministry? A small church with a youth group of about fifteen relied on youth for planning all the programs for fellowship group. The youth decided at the beginning of the year what topics they wanted to deal with on Sunday evenings. They worked out how many Sundays they would spend on each topic and what part of the topic each Sunday would cover. Then each Sunday was assigned to a specific youth, who prepared and led the program for the evening. Youth who are incredibly busy probably do not have time for that depth of involvement. But they would probably be willing to help develop a list of questions that youth are asking, or to make decisions about what content, values, and experiences would help them probe a part of the game plan.

Because you want to plan long-range, and youth graduate and move on, ultimate control of the planning process needs to stay in the leadership team. But youth can be involved in that process, as we have seen in both this question and in the previous one. Give youth responsibility in small doses, for specific areas, as a part of the total planning process in the leadership team. As youth gain skills and confidence in planning, give them additional responsibility as they are willing to accept it. Include younger youth in the planning process so that they can gain skills and confidence in planning for ministry. Include as a part of the plan for younger youth specific units on planning and decision making. Teach them how to plan by allowing them to help make decisions for a retreat or some other activity.

How can youth be encouraged to plan their own ministries?

You can encourage them by giving them specific responsibilities in planning. Do this in small steps so that they can succeed and gain confidence in the process. Do not begin by saying, "The fall retreat is coming up. What do you want to do?" Rather, say something such as, "The fall retreat is coming up. I'd like for you to think about the times for worship at the retreat and suggest some ways we can make them more meaningful. First, let's talk about last year. What was

there about the worship that really spoke to you?” Then you can move the group to explore what it is about worship that speaks to them, what kinds of experiences are meaningful, and so forth. They may suggest a Communion service or a time of baptismal renewal using the full ritual. (Yes, youth actually do say things like that. They love the mystery of ritual. It has a power that speaks to their souls.) Or they may suggest times of quiet meditation, where each person has thirty minutes to read the Bible and think about a specific question.

Invite them to think about the theme of the retreat, which should already be decided. Of the kinds of worship they have listed, which ones would lend themselves to carrying out the theme? How would they do that?

Then invite youth to help you think about specifics. What kind of worship experience would go at what time during the retreat? What equipment and supplies will be needed for that? Who will take responsibility for gathering supplies and preparing the worship space? Who will help lead the worship time?

This model can be used for planning all kinds of activities and programs, each of which speaks to specific youth needs—because youth have been involved in the planning. In the real world of the twenty-first century, most youth are so busy that they will not be able to give a lot of time to planning, so you may need to include planning times as part of your fellowship time on Sunday evenings (or whenever you have it).

31 **We need help in planning for long-range projects, specifically setting priorities (Why do youth want to go?) and planning and logistics (What do we do about fundraising, making arrangements for the trip, and so forth?).**

First, think about why youth want to go. Some will sign up for almost anything that looks fun. Some youth will sign up for a mission trip/work camp because they want to do something to help other people, to make a difference in the world, or to see a different part of the country. Some want to go to national events because they like the excitement of being part of a large group or because they want to hear outstanding speakers and musicians. The point is that different youth have different motivations, and you need to be aware of the differences so that you can appeal to all of them. You also need to be aware of what is appropriate in terms of motivation. For example, you do not promote a work camp, where

youth are expected to spend long hours working on a project, the same way you promote a rock concert. You do not promote a backpacking or canoeing trip—where you will be camping out, doing lots of physical exertion, and expecting everyone to take an equal share of responsibility—the same way you promote a national youth event.

Involve youth in planning and promotion. If youth know what the event is, they know how to promote it to their friends in a way that will be both honest and appealing. They also know how to apply tough love: “John, you may want to think a long time before you sign up for this trip. It requires a lot of hard work—and getting up early. It will be fun, but not party-time fun. Think it over carefully.” Involving youth in planning helps motivate them for the details of the trip, including getting registration, money, medical forms, and permission slips in on time. It also prepares them for the less attractive parts of the trip, such as long hours in a van, sleeping on church basement floors, working hard in the heat, and not having access to unlimited hot water, telephones, and e-mail.

Now, think about the planning. Plan in reverse order; that is, put down the date for the event or trip and then work backward from there. List all the things you need to do in order to make the trip a success. Then list when each of those things needs to be done. As a final step, you may want to put down a date for when you need to start working on each of the steps, just so you will not get caught at the last minute. The chart below is one way to illustrate what we mean.

YOUTH MISSION TRIP

Task	Begin Work	Task Completed
Publicity and recruiting	December 1	January 15
Fundraising	February 15	June 1
Youth registration drive	February 15	March 15
Arrange transportation	March 15	May 15
Arrange housing	April 15	June 1
All permission forms in	May 1	June 30
Medical forms in	May 1	June 30
Trip: July 6–16		

Some of that may seem early, but it is much better to be early than to be late. In the case of transportation, for example, if you are competing with other groups for the use of the church van, you need to be on the list early. If you need to charter a bus, you may need to begin looking for bids

even earlier. The same is true for planning fundraising for the trip. You want to be on the church calendar early so that you are not competing with a lot of other events for people's time and attention. Also, this planning schedule takes place during Lent and Easter, when most churches have extra activities that you need to plan around.

Early registration is also important. You may have youth who have to cancel and other youth who decide later they would like to go, but those details can be worked out. People who register early save money for national (and some conference) youth events. Since those events also require cash deposits, you need to plan for early fundraising, or borrow from your youth budget until the fundraising phase is complete.

