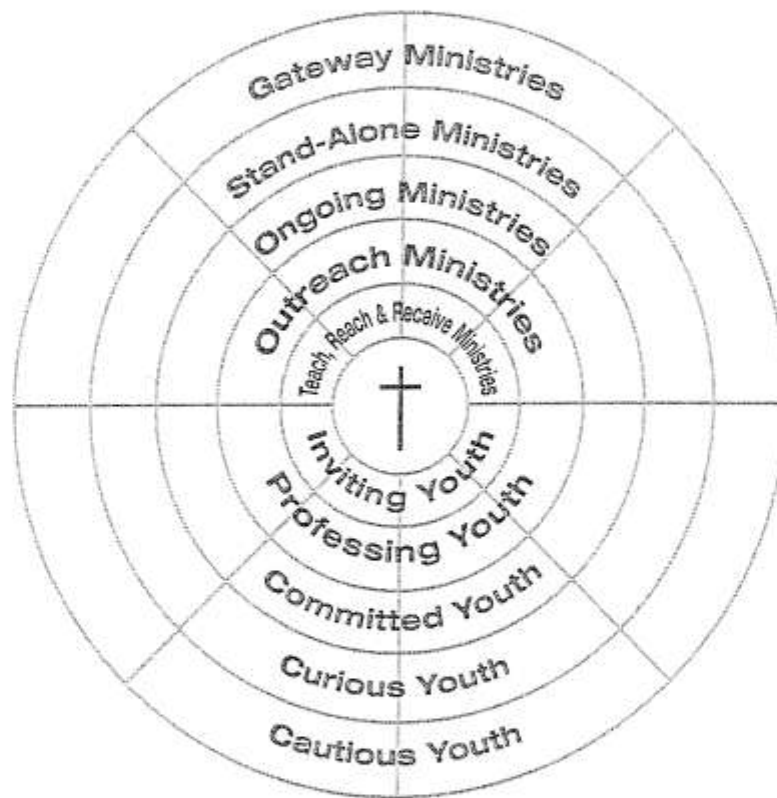


# Chapter

# 4

## The Web of Discipleship



There are only three directions people can travel on the web in relation to the center, which is Christ. They can move toward or away, or they can circle. Many of us spend the bulk of our faith journey circling. Personal growth or faith crisis may find us suddenly moving in or away, only to then circle again until the next personal change.

## Reaching Out to Cautious Youth

Before ministry with youth can begin, there needs to be an audience. Begin by reaching out to the youth around you: the church, area schools, sports complexes, fine arts programs, stores, and clubs. These are the youth God has placed in your view. These are the ones you should be introducing to the good news of Jesus Christ. How this introduction takes place is important because many youth today are suspicious of the church and the message they don't understand.

Begin with an attitude check. Remove the lenses of expectation about what is acceptable, normal, average, and relevant for today's youth. Holding out acceptance of certain youth until they conform to some preconceived Christian ideal is a misrepresentation of God's grace. It's like waiting until a teenager is no longer hungry before letting him or her have dinner.

### Characteristics of Cautious Youth

It's vital to understand that many youth outside the church are uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the church and what it's about. They are cautious about visiting or letting their defenses down in unfamiliar territory. Carefully plan ministry at this level in non-threatening and nonjudgmental ways. Activities and even the language used should be chosen thoughtfully. The priority with cautious youth should be taking time to know them as individuals and showing them, rather than telling them, the love and acceptance of Christ.

### Gateway Ministries

Ministries at this level are gateways for people to jump on the web of discipleship. The intent is to allow cautious youth to meet other people of faith, youth and adult, and let them know, more by actions than by words, that they are welcome as they are. Keep activities temperate, festive, and yet entirely purposeful. Keep prayers short and rooted in the experiences of the youth. Don't put cautious teens on the spot in front of other youth with hard or personally revealing questions.

### Ministries to Consider

Fellowship events or programs that happen away from the church building can include movies, miniature golf, cookouts, team sports, day trips, concerts, amusement parks, pizza parties, and fundraising events.

#### Things to Remember

- Greet the youth individually by name.
- Learn something about them—likes, interests, gifts, or talents they have.
- Seek to know them as God has sent them, looking for goodness and potential.
- Find ways to need them; ask them to help you with things.
- Expect them to come again. Anticipate them, and celebrate when they do.
- There's an old saying that people don't care what you know until they know that you care. This is particularly true for cautious youth.

When they trust you care about them, they will, on their own, begin asking about doing things together that indicate they are moving to a different place on the discipleship web.

## Ministry With Curious Youth

Youth today are as hungry and as curious for spiritual meaning as any generation of people has ever been. Youth circling at this level on the web aren't totally convinced that the Christian life is for them, but they continue to attend because they enjoy the people and the ministries. They know the songs, the prayers, the leaders, and what is expected; but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ still doesn't make sense to them.

#### Characteristics of Curious Youth

Youth at this level are coasting through your ministry opportunities. This is another way of saying they haven't engaged themselves in anything that is specifically meaningful for them. They may be waiting for the right kind of opportunity, the right kind of invitation, or the right kind of mentor. Whatever it may be, your task with the curious youth is to stay close until you can get a sense of what it is that piques their interest. It may be helping with planning, serving in a mission, working with a tutoring program, reading Scripture, or just about anything that will engage them in meaningful work.

#### Stand-Alone Ministries

These are good kids with good hearts and good intentions. They deserve our best efforts at keeping them engaged and involved until

they make the move to a different place on the web. When a match between their curiosity and meaningful work is made, they may be ready to progress. Focus on relating them to other Christian youth and adults; plan for and anticipate them. Plan for short-term ministries of less than four meetings or components. If longer commitments are required, they tend to find ways to coast around it rather than to become engaged.

### Ministries to Consider

Guided service opportunities and brief studies can include beginning Bible study; singing for convalescent homes; working in mission work camps; collecting items for Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets; serving at a soup kitchen; taking part in brief studies on the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, global concerns, or an overview of the Old or New Testament; or watching a movie with discussion following.

### Things to Remember

- Let your life, language, behavior, choices, and habits be a visual witness for how an individual relates to God.
- These youth are more open to what they see, rather than what they hear. Share basic biblical ideas and Christian concepts. This doesn't mean pushing them to make decisions. First let them see these notions in practice in your life and in the lives of other adults and youth they look up to or respect.
- Invite them to participate with others; significant relationships with a few other youth and an adult is a priority.
- Look for teaching moments to nudge them into thinking about ministry opportunities at a deeper level.

When they find a vehicle or interest that piques their curiosity, they may be willing to follow it to a new place on the web.

## Ministry With Committed Youth

When youth reach this place on the web, what you offer in terms of ministry classes or events is less important to them than simply being with the group. Where you will be is where they will be. They like you; they like the programs; they attend whatever happens next and anticipate whatever you're offering. These are the youth you count on as regulars for just about anything you are planning.

Where we make a mistake with this group is when we equate their regular attendance with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, many teens at this level are still not convinced of this truth for their own lives. They simply like being with the group and doing the things you do.

#### **Characteristics of Committed Youth**

These are typically good, honest, upright, and in many cases very moral and considerate teens. They just haven't made a choice for themselves yet to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

#### **Ongoing Ministries**

Ministry at this level should focus on opportunities for a decision for Christ. Don't be one-dimensional with commitment evangelism; there are many ways to come to Christ and many ways to make a decision. If we offer only the way we experienced salvation for ourselves, we are cloning, not evangelizing. Paul was blinded during a trip; Jacob wrestled all night with an angel; and John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born! Get the picture? God is creative and quite capable of reaching us in many ways, and we should be as versatile as we can be to prepare others to receive God's salvation.

#### **Ministries to Consider**

Ministries to these youth include service opportunities to the congregation and community and longer-term studies such as helping with vacation Bible school; ushering or greeting for Sunday service; running audiovisual equipment; serving at church dinners; tutoring; hosting parties or picnics for children's homes or hospitals; helping with a city recreation program; joining a Covenant Discipleship Group; studying other religions and denominations; and taking part in weekly Bible study groups, retreats, and sermon discussion groups.

#### **Things to Remember**

- Invite them to participate in the full life of the church through study, worship, and service offering a grounded lifelong journey of faith.
- Demonstrate and talk about Christian values.
- Provide opportunities for nurture and growth in Christian faith and daily life.

- Establish the Bible as the primary guide for Christians. Do this through studies, discussions, devotions, and reflections. Keep a Bible visible; use it and know it.
- Establish prayers as a key discipline for Christians. Study prayer, practice prayer, and model this for youth.
- Invite youth to commit their lives to Christ. When they are presented with the right challenge at the right time, they will accept the call to commit their lives to Christ and to move to the next level.

## Ministry With Professing Youth

At this place on the web, youth have made a commitment to have Jesus Christ at the center of their lives. At this level youth will want to learn how to be better followers of Christ, and they will want to know what to do to reinforce this life choice. The kinds of opportunities you offer at this level need to reflect this growing interest in deeper spirituality and discipleship.

### Characteristics of Professing Youth

It's common to see youth at this level turn their backs on those who have not made a conscious decision for Christ, even the ones in their own youth ministry. Often it begins with complaining that programs aren't religious enough, which is also a way of saying other youth are not as important as we are. Eventually they stop attending events designed for cautious and curious youth altogether, because it's "a waste of their time." Paul teaches in Romans 12:3-13 and again in 1 Corinthians 12:4-27 that we are all part of the Body of Christ, and until this is behaved as well as believed, we're not as close to God as we may think.

### Outreach Ministries

Ministry at this level should focus on a deeper faith walk (developing Christian habits, using the means of grace) and on living as the Body of Christ. It is also at this level that you can begin to encourage youth to lead in discipleship activities, teach, and take part in other ministry roles.

### Ministries to Consider

Opportunities include taking part in worship, helping with ministry to the congregation, and having a freer hand in outreach to the community. Youth might serve on appropriate church committees; help with

new member visitation; write a column in the church newsletter or bulletin; design and lead a worship service for children; take part in a clown ministry; write prayers or litanies for use in worship services; pray at congregational functions; witness personally in worship; help with children's sermons or puppet shows for children; and prepare short messages for a local radio station.

#### Things to Remember

- Go slowly and don't take it personally when it seems as if they are not growing deep enough fast enough. A deep faith is something that is grown in one's spirit, not acquired in a single lump.
- Help youth practice expressing their faith in a variety of ways: writing, movement, words, art, liturgy, voice, and actions.
- Help youth understand that what others see them doing is as instructive as what others hear them saying.

When teens on this place on the web understand that we are all incomplete as long as any one part of us (another person) is not on this web of discipleship; when they realize that it takes different kinds of outreach to reach different kinds of people; when they begin to see cautious, curious, and committed youth as persons they can effectively reach, then they open up and begin to move to the next level on the web.

## Ministry With Inviting Youth

These are deeply committed Christians who know and appreciate the differences in teens. They willingly give up their own agendas to do whatever it takes to get others onto the web of discipleship, and then they walk with them as they circle and grow toward Christ.

#### Characteristics of Inviting Youth

Youth at this level know you don't get others onto the web by just sending them invitations and telling them where the group meets. They don't say things like, "See ya there!" Real inviters know that a genuine invitation means telling cautious youth what time they'll pick them up; taking them to the place where the group meets; and staying with them from beginning to end. Inviting youth understand that without a constant flow of new youth on the web, the day could come when there are no youth on the web at all.

### Teach, Reach, and Receive Ministries

Ministry at this level should focus on shared strategies for reaching new youth, leadership training under other qualified teachers, and opportunities for significant leadership in the larger church.

### Ministries to Consider

Ministries can include participating as a leader and a guide—leading many of the ministries already listed, such as mentoring other youth; coaching a team, either sports or spiritual; or leading a short-term Bible study.

### Things to Remember

- Encourage youth to keep up a vital prayer and devotional life, including daily Bible reading.
- Provide an accountability group for spiritual direction, nurture, and clarification. (See Covenant Discipleship Groups on page 115.)
- Without significant and meaningful responsibility, youth may feel they are not necessary and may slip away.

## Balance on the Web

Knowing your potential audience and what keeps them engaged helps you visualize and create a balanced youth ministry with a clear direction everyone can understand and work with.

As you review the present ministries you offer youth within the total scope of your church (See the inventory list in Chapter One.), determine whether each opportunity appeals more to the cautious, curious, committed, professing, or inviting type of youth. Then place a dot for each opportunity on the appropriate spot on the web. After you've placed all your opportunities on the web, look for balance.

If there are too many dots on the outer rings, you may not be allowing youth enough opportunity to grow spiritually as they make a commitment to Christ. If you have most of your dots in the inner rings, you may not have adequate ways for new youth to join your ministry. Balance means having at least one dot on each ring before you have two on any ring. This means that there is at least one non-threatening, fun, gateway program to reach and to receive new youth; another opportunity available when they're ready to grow into something a bit more challenging;



another dot for those who like being with the others in longer commitments; a deep Christian-based faith opportunity for those who have given their life to Christ; and a place to keep inviting youth involved in reaching out to others.

## Numbers Decrease as Commitment Increases

We know that most youth today are not on the web at all; they are not involved with the church at any level. We can assume that the next largest segment of youth is the cautious group, followed by the smaller curious ones, followed by the still-shrinking number of committed kids, and even fewer professing and inviting youth.

When ministries are developed primarily for professing youth, we are targeting a rather small segment of youth and are not providing for the largest segment of teens just beginning their Christian journey. Balance means taking each level of youth seriously and prayerfully. If your planning is alienating more youth than are being invited, how faithful to the Great Commission are you? Instead of asking only, "Who is here?", ask "Who is not here?" What segments of youth are not represented? Why? What needs to happen to continue to reach and to receive new youth, keep them growing in their faith walk, and allow them significant opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the life of future ministries? These kinds of questions and subsequent answers will help you create a balanced and effective ministry.

Note that it is difficult to have a "once-and-for-all" balanced youth ministry design. Ministry changes constantly with the changing needs of the youth. If a church has a youth ministry that is the same each year without dropping or adding anything, then it will probably begin to lose impact with the youth and will eventually lose participation.