

CHAPTER 11**Ten Common Mistakes in Youth Ministry**

Based on everything they had heard, Betsy, Dave, and Jennifer created a list of ten of the most common mistakes in youth ministry.

1. Unclear Definition of *Youth*

A very fuzzy definition of *youth* is a problem for many youth ministries. Should the youth ministry include ten-year-olds or nineteen-year-olds or sixth graders or those who have graduated from high school? These questions do not have absolute answers, but the answers your church provides are helpful in guiding the adult leaders of youth. For a youth ministry to be "successful" it needs to have some sense of the population it is serving. The congregation may opt not to have younger youth (ages 10-12) or older youth (after age 18) in youth fellowship, but the congregation must include these two age groups in their own ministry.

2. Mistaking Youth Fellowship for Youth Ministry

Youth ministry is not just youth fellowship. The umbrella concept of youth ministry must be remembered. No one part of the youth ministry of a congregation can meet everyone's expectations. Similarly, no one program can do everything that ought to be done in a congregation's ministry with/to/by youth. No matter how small or large your church, youth fellowship is just a part of the congregation's youth ministry.

3. Thinking That Youth Ministry Is Just Program

A third common mistake is to understand youth ministry as simply program. There is little, if any, contact or relational ministry. The focus of the ministry is always on content. The adults and youth have no contact outside of the youth ministry meeting time. Adults don't build relationships with young people.

This misunderstanding occurs in large churches as well as in small ones. In fact, many large churches suffer from this when paid professional staff understand their position in terms of creating and preparing program and not in a more holistic understanding of being involved in ministry. Many times the patient, sustaining gift of presence is given up for another program.

4. Forgetting the Family and School Focus

Another common mistake is to forget that for the majority of young people life is controlled by family and school. It is imperative to know what is going on in both spheres of a young person's life. At times, the adult workers with youth may know what is going

on in the family, but they don't know what is going on at the school. Often those fellowships that do place an emphasis on the school forget the home environment and have no idea what is going on at home. It is important to know what is going on at school, to have contact with school officials, and to have contact with the parents. One would do well to visit in the school and in the home.

5. Recruiting the Wrong Volunteers

Another error is allowing inappropriate adults to volunteer in the youth ministry. Too often the request for adults to work with youth comes as a blanket invitation to any warm body. While recruiting adults is often difficult, many churches would be better off without a youth fellowship than with the wrong adults leading the ministry. The church needs to maintain oversight of adults working with/to/by young people. This does not mean that we need perfect adults or adults who cannot make mistakes or grow in their ability to be a part of a congregation's youth ministry, but it does mean that we need to carefully consider the gifts and graces of all those who will be in direct contact with the young people of each congregation.

6. Ignoring the Older Youth

In a congregation's desire to build a successful youth fellowship or even youth ministry, the older youth may be sacrificed so that the youth fellowship can be built around younger youth. These younger youth will potentially follow the program through the years they are in the congregation. While this option seems to be sensible, often what occurs is that the youth fellowship gains a reputation as appropriate only for younger teens. The unwritten understanding is that when a young person reaches sixteen, gets a driver's license, or assumes part-time work, he or she leaves youth fellowship. While it is helpful, at times, to build a youth fellowship with younger youth, one cannot forget or give up on older youth. Youth ministry must be comprehensive to all youth, and it is a mistake to ignore those of a certain age.

7. Not Allowing Youth to Lead

Another common mistake is not taking youth and their leadership abilities seriously. Too many youth fellowships are run by adults. These adult youth leaders forget that good ministry is with youth and by youth. A good youth ministry needs to take youth seriously, listening to their voice, perhaps even giving youth a voice (advocating). While it is often difficult for those adults who are in leadership positions in youth ministry to have their ideas questioned, youth need the opportunity to speak, to disagree, and to form and implement their own ideas. A successful youth fellowship will devise a way to develop youth as leaders in their fellowship.

8. Being Too Tied to Tradition

Don't be afraid to try new ideas, attempt new programs, develop new traditions, and challenge old traditions. In youth ministry, as well as youth fellowship, traditions become established in two or three years. Some are helpful; others need to be challenged or done away with. We cannot be too tied to the past in our youth ministry. Every three or four years, not only do the young people change, but the community and world in which the

young people are growing up in changes as well. Rigidity of program and being too tied to the past make up another common mistake in youth fellowship.

9. Overemphasizing Entertainment

Sometimes youth fellowships are created by congregations to be merely a babysitting group. In these situations, youth fellowship avoids any serious grappling with issues of faith, especially as those faith issues affect our world at large. A faithful youth ministry will not avoid serious social concerns. Being a Christian is a serious matter, and what God expects and wants of us is a serious issue. None of us has the definitive answer to what God desires of us, but we must help youth struggle with their questions of faith and their response in this world at this time.

10. Ignoring Youth's Hunger for the Holy

Youth have a hunger for the holy. While many youth will not admit or perhaps even acknowledge this hunger, it exists nonetheless (just as it exists in the lives of adults in God's creation). Youth ministry needs to help youth understand this hunger, deal with the hunger, and celebrate God's sometimes mysterious presence in the world. Unfortunately, few congregations deal with this hunger in any substantial way.

Conclusion

If you are in youth ministry for any length of time, you will discover that it is much like any other form of ministry. Youth ministry starts with youth, but it quickly spreads into a holistic understanding of ministry. Being concerned with youth means being concerned with their family situation, including parents and siblings. Being concerned with youth means being concerned about the cultural and societal norms that shape the institutions, both familial and societal, that youth participate in and live in. Being concerned with youth means being willing to advocate on their behalf. Being concerned with youth means listening to the voices of youth who are often unheard by adults in this culture. Being concerned with youth means being concerned with all of God's creation. Youth ministry, like any other form of ministry, leads us into concern for the whole situation in which human beings find themselves.

We have reached the end of the discussion about youth ministry for now. One of the impressions many students get after leaving my classes is that they must be doing a poor job of youth ministry. They haven't been doing anything like what I've been describing in the preceding pages. They feel unworthy and unappreciated. They begin to question whether they have gifts and graces and ought to be involved in youth ministry. One of the problems with anyone's talking about youth ministry is that we tend to focus on our successes and not on our failures. We talk about all those great things we or others are doing in youth ministry and fail to notice the mundane things that keep the ministry alive in countless congregations. We don't share all of our mistakes, trials, and tribulations. I want to assure you that we all have those moments when, despite our best-laid plans and intentions, things fall apart.

This handbook is meant only to start the conversation about your congregation's youth ministry. It is not the "Bible" for youth ministry. No one has all the answers in youth ministry. I have attempted to share with you, in a simple, straightforward manner, what I believe about youth ministry and how I think you can help youth ministry happen in your congregation.

We must walk a fine line in our theological understanding of youth ministry between arrogant pride and not responding to God's ordinances. Too many times the youth ministry lives or dies with the adult leaders. This might lead us to think that the ministry is "our" ministry, not the ministry of God and the church. Our hope is placed on human abilities and knowledge. We begin to believe that using this technique or that strategy can make youth ministry work. This is simply not the case. We are not God, and God's Spirit refuses to be limited by us and our failings.

On the other hand, there are people who believe that God always operates in human history miraculously. They expect God to break into their congregation and divinely fix the youth ministry. While I affirm that God has this power, I also note that God rarely uses power in this way. Rather, God allows us creatures to become involved in the process of creation and life with God.

If a congregation is to have a successful youth ministry, it will happen because the people of God, using the gifts and graces given to them by God, have joined with God's Spirit and with the young people. Youth ministry takes both prayer and action.

This handbook cannot guarantee success in youth ministry. However, if a congregation follows the principles developed here, then with the leading of God's Spirit, I believe an appropriate youth ministry for that congregation will be developed.

Grace and peace in your efforts and in your ministry with God. God bless!