

CHAPTER 3

Key Ingredients for Effective and Faithful Youth Ministry

Jennifer, Dave, and Betsy were anticipating the second session of their youth ministry training session, as the speaker had promised to address the "secret" of congregational youth ministry. They really wanted to know what made for successful youth ministry in other churches around the country.

There can be little doubt that "effective youth ministry" is a major concern of both pastors and laypersons.' While what constitutes effective youth ministry can be debated endlessly, four key ingredients constitute "effective" and "faithful" youth ministry from a congregational perspective.

Intentional Ministry

Congregations ought to have intentions, definite plans, purposes, goals, and objectives toward which energy and resources can be mobilized. Ministry must be, at times, a reaction, such as reacting to a death or to a crisis. But ministry should also be thoughtful planning and attention to what God and the church are called to be and to do. Congregational youth ministry is responding to God's call in the individual and collective lives of the congregation.

Intentional youth ministry develops a clearly understood purpose with goals and objectives. While most major denominations have formulated some sort of purpose statement for "their" youth ministry, each congregation needs to struggle with its own specific intentions for its youth ministry to be effective and faithful.

Dean Hoge and some of his colleagues did a survey of youth ministers and parents of teenagers, representing six denominations, identifying their intended goals for youth ministry. The survey called for educators and parents from various different denominations to rank the sixty given items in order of preference for the intentions of youth ministry. The results point to several issues that are crucial in determining a congregation's intentions for youth ministry.

Of the sixty items, the number-one priority for youth ministry over the entire survey was that youth should have "a healthy self-concept about their value and worthiness as a person." While this was the overall highest priority, when the survey was examined denominationally, two denominations did not agree with this assessment. For the Southern

Baptist and Church of God educators and parents, having "a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" was the number-one priority for youth ministry.²

There are two important points to be made about Dean Hoge's survey. The first is not which priority is the best, but that different people, congregations, and denominations can and do view the intentions of youth ministry differently. Indeed, they ought to be viewed differently. Thus a key question that must be answered by each congregation is this: What are your congregation's intentions in youth ministry? Do you intend

- to have youth set an example of Christian behavior?
- for youth to have a faith life that holds meaning in the everyday world?
- for youth to develop a personal relationship with Jesus or the triune God?
- for youth to have a healthy self-concept?
- to help "youth to grow spiritually"?³
- to have youth attend worship or youth group?

All of these goals may be considered faithful intentions of youth ministry, but each person, congregation, and denomination will give priority to these goals in a different order or manner.

Congregational youth ministry may be able to sustain several intentions at once, but sooner or later priority attention must be given to just a few. Once a congregation has decided which direction to take in youth ministry, a comprehensive vision of youth ministry and how it can be accomplished can be carried out.

Think back on chapter 2 and the different images of youth ministry presented there. Each image has a predominant intention for youth ministry. Most of us respond to one image more than to another precisely because our intentions, our understanding of the goals of youth ministry, differ.

Further, each individual local church is different from the composite of its denominational tendencies. So you may or may not agree with the results of Hoge's survey. The point is not which intention is "more appropriate" or better than the other. Rather, we must realize that various different intentions are legitimately a part of youth ministry. Your church and you must begin to have some intentions for youth ministry to be truly effective.

The second important learning from the survey is that educators (youth ministers) and parents can have vastly different intentions for youth ministry. For example, one of the highest priorities of youth ministry for parents across denominational lines was that youth should cooperate with parents, school, and church authorities. However, the educators never viewed this as one of their top priorities for youth ministry. Thus parents and youth ministers may have vastly different ideas about what youth ministry should be about. And remember that parents and educators represent just two parts of local congregational life. Other members of the congregation may have still different ideas about what is important in youth ministry.

Differences within the congregation around the intentions or ideas for youth ministry need to be acknowledged and discussed so that compromises and a cohesive vision can be articulated and then implemented.

I can still remember a conversation I had with several concerned parents who felt that my job as youth minister was to provide fun activities for their youth to attend under the auspices of the church. However, with the support of the youth council, I had initiated

a spiritual growth segment into this church's youth ministry. The parents wanted only fun and games, but the youth wanted something more substantial.

Here is another example of what we have been discussing. A national gathering of youth from a mainline denomination takes place each summer on the beach. The expressed purpose of this gathering is to lead youth to a relationship with Jesus Christ—a worthy goal. The group's own research suggests that over 95 percent of the youth attending already profess to have, before they come to the event, a personal and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. And many of the youth who attend this event continue to return, even after they are out of the "youth" category. The national gathering could be more effective and faithful, I believe, if it helped the youth grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. This is a different intention and would be approached differently than trying to bring youth to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another example: Leaders in a large church in the South, with over 2,000 members, could not understand why only sixteen or so youth were involved in the Sunday school and fellowship parts of their youth ministry. It became obvious in our discussions together that the adult workers with youth in the church were nearly equally divided on what their intentions should be in youth ministry. Half believed that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was the purpose of youth ministry, and half wanted to help the youth develop positive images of themselves. Now both intentions are excellent, but these adult workers with youth were at odds with each other over these intentions. Both intentions could probably be accomplished at this church, but not until the problem was recognized, negotiated, and dealt with in a positive spirit of working together.

Final Word on Intentions

I am convinced that four types of people need to be involved in the formulating of the purposes, goals, and objectives of youth ministry. These are the leaders of the congregation (or the "power" people in a congregation if they are not the elected leaders); the parents of the youth who are or could be involved; the youth themselves; and the adult workers with youth, those whom the church hopes to take the leadership in accomplishing its intentions. It is only as this mix of people in the local setting sit down and carefully think through what they wish youth ministry to be about that youth ministry can be tailored for each particular setting. Further, it is as each local church gathers people together to discuss their intentions in youth ministry that the church, its leaders, and its youth leaders can become committed and can commit the resources of the congregation to youth ministry.

As a purpose statement, with refined goals and objectives, is created by people in local settings, other issues will surface, such as allocation of resources, including finances, leadership, and space; planning; theological assumptions; and biblical understandings. As people in the local setting struggle with these issues, make conscious decisions about

SOME POSSIBLE GOALS FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

1. Youth will have a healthy self-concept about their value and worthiness as a person.
2. Youth will set an example of Christian behavior.
3. Youth will grow in their faith.
4. Youth will have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
5. Youth will attend worship.
6. Youth will provide church leadership.
7. The church will provide youth a safe haven from the outside world.
8. Youth will explore life vocations from the aspect of God's calling in their lives.
9. Youth will identify themselves as Christians and act accordingly.
10. Youth will explore how to build Christian community by participating in one.
11. Youth and the church will begin to create a better world with God's help.
12. Youth will begin an active prayer life.
13. Youth will have experienced the gift of tongues.
14. Youth will have knowledge of the Christian tradition.
15. Youth will have knowledge of world religions.
16. Ten adults in the congregation will know each youth by name.
17. *
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.

* What other goals would you add? How would you prioritize this list?

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them, and attempt to carry them out that youth ministry will become truly intentional in character and form.

This means that the youth ministry at First Church may be quite similar or very different from youth ministry in an urban parish or a rural setting or even in the church across the street. This means that some youth ministries that "work" or are "successful" in one place may not work in another, as the intentions of each congregation may be different. Certain congregations are going to have specific intentions that are not appropriate for all congregations.

For example, many Korean-American congregations will need to deal with the issue of parental authority in a vastly different way from other congregations because of the nature of the family structure in Korea and in North America. Black congregations may want to specifically focus on black males and issues of identity that are not appropriate for white congregations. Rural congregations may have a vastly different agenda from that of growing suburban congregations.

Relational Ministry

Youth ministry, understood as relationship—a bond that exists between the leader and the youth—is not new. However, in many cases the idea of relational ministry is understood strictly in terms of the relationship between the adult workers with youth and the youth themselves.

The concept of youth ministry as being limited to the relationship between the adult worker with youth and the youth themselves *can be* destructive. Some charismatic adult workers with youth use relational ministry to create a group that focuses on adult leadership. The ministry points to the adult workers themselves and not beyond them to the church and to the Triune God. When this happens, the youth ministry is in trouble. Similarly, some adult workers with youth or youth themselves discover that a quick way to build a sense of purpose and cohesiveness is to unite against a common enemy. The "common enemy" that unites the group can be either the church or parents. Occasionally the scenario is played out where other youth, the society in which the youth live, or the senior pastor—and in some cases, even the youth worker—become the enemy.

I maintain that youth ministry, as all other ministries, is inherently relational, people incarnating the love of God. It is God's people reaching out to God's creation, just as God reaches out to God's creation. Adult workers with youth need to develop positive adult friendships with youth. Chapter 4 includes a discussion on how to develop strong, healthy relationships between adult workers with youth and the youth involved in that ministry.

The idea of relational ministry in youth ministry includes at least three main relationships besides the relationship of the adult workers with youth. They are (1) the relationship between God and youth; (2) the relationship between youth and the "created order"; and (3) the relationship between youth and God's gift, the church.

The Relationship Between Youth and God

Youth ministry is, in a very real sense, concerned with the relationship between the young person and God, understood in God's triune fullness. The adolescent years are a perfect time, developmentally, to examine the issue of God's coming to human beings as one fully human and yet fully divine, Jesus the Christ. Some have, rightly so, pushed the concept of Jesus as a friend to youth. However, we can become too Christ-centered in our ministry. By this I mean that Christ becomes God, and we, in effect, end up worshipping Christ—making Jesus into an idol—and not God in God's fullness, whom we of the Christian faith have affirmed as the Triune God.

While recognizing that no adult can be fully responsible for the relationship that does or does not exist between youth and God, youth ministry needs to be involved in helping young people create, explore, examine, and strengthen their relationship with God. Youth ministry needs to be involved with challenging youth in their faith and assisting them to mature in their relationship with God.

The Relationship Between Youth and the Created Order

Youth ministry is concerned with the relationship between youth and God's creation. The term "created order" refers to all of God's creation. Thus the relationships between youth and their family—parents, siblings, extended family—and other youth are all included in this category. And relational ministry goes beyond youth and their families to

youth and God's creation. The world includes other people as well as the earth itself. Obviously this is a very comprehensive arena.

Many writers and thinkers have helped us to understand the young person's quest for identity. Youth are involved in some way in that process all of their teen years. Relational youth ministry ought to be involved in working with youth and their image of themselves, helping them to understand the image of God, in which they are created. Thus relational youth ministry helps youth to relate to God, to the church, to God's creation—both human and nonhuman—and to themselves.

Youth, no less than anyone else in society, are in relationships with God's creation. How they respond and act toward that creation is a large part of what being part of God's community is all about. It is essential that youth ministry be involved with helping youth deal with God's creation, both human and otherwise, in a faithful manner.

The Relationship Between Youth and God's Gift, the Church

Those of us who come at youth ministry from a congregational or church base need to remember the church. Youth are called to be in relationship with God, but they are also called to be in relationship with a body of disciples, a body of believers. The church was and is God's gift to us as Christians.

In many circles a debate rages over whether the church is necessary. Sometimes the debate centers around whether the church is necessary for salvation. Some people proclaim, "I'm a good Christian, even though I don't participate in or belong to a church."

One of the misunderstandings we have in North American Christianity is the idea that while the church is a good idea, we really don't need it. Individualism runs rampant in our culture. Any understanding of tradition or scripture suggests that the church is very necessary for Christians. While it may not be a condition for salvation, youth need to be connected with a body of believers—a church—who can help nurture them, assist them, and challenge them to help others in the community of believers in a similar manner.

Programmatic Ministry

Youth ministry needs to have content in addition to relationships and intentionality. Michael Warren, a well-known Roman Catholic educator, has called relational ministry the "contact" part of youth ministry and the programmatic area the "content" part of youth ministry.⁴ Both areas are important. Program is a part of youth ministry, but not all of youth ministry. A well-conceived programmatic ministry can, in conjunction with a ministry of intentionality and relationships, attract and involve youth in sizable numbers and in Christian growth.

Program is never "the answer." Those who opt for this view often end up writing books of "canned" programs or training youth "professionals" to insert a new program without an understanding of the local setting or any of the other factors that need to be taken into account for a program to be "effective." I want to spend some time discussing how to build a strong programmatic component of youth ministry, but I will save that discussion for the next chapter.

During a break in their session, our friends Betsy, Dave, and Jennifer began to think about the difference between a programmatic and a relational understanding of youth ministry. They asked these questions of themselves and their church's youth ministry: Has our youth ministry been focused strictly on program to the exclusion of

relationships? Has our youth ministry been focused strictly on relationships without any meaningful program or content?

Faithfulness, or Gospel, Ministry

Youth ministry ought to be "faithful." Youth ministry from a congregational perspective assumes a Christian community and a Christian context. The very reason why we as a church, or as Christians, are about youth ministry is to be faithful. Unfortunately, the Christian community has been divided upon how an individual Christian is to be faithful in the world.

For example, look at the Christian response to abortion. While few Christian groups openly endorse abortion, the Christian church has been divided about how a Christian should respond to the issue of abortion. People on either side of the abortion debate have trouble understanding or even believing that those on the opposite side are really Christians. Despite the problems in knowing how to act in a faithful manner, we who are involved in youth ministry need to attempt to be faithful. While one cannot spell out all of what it means to be faithful, several issues appear to be extremely important in exploring what it means to be faithful in youth ministry.

Speak the Truth in Love (Ephesians 4:15a) Frederick Buechner said it well

when he wrote:

Let the preacher tell the truth. The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner. . . . That is a tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. This is the comedy. . . . And just as in fairy tales extraordinary things happen. It is impossible for anybody to leave behind the darkness of the world he carries on his back like a snail, but for God all things are possible. That is the fairy tale. All together they are the truth. But to preach the Gospel is not just to tell the truth but to tell the truth in love, and to tell the truth in love means to tell it with concern not only for the truth that is being told but with concern for the people it is being told to.⁵

Youth ministry must tell the truth for it to be faithful. It must be centered in the Christian story and present that story in all of its ambiguities. The Christian story is both complex and simple. It is at the same time the story we know so well, and the story that has been forgotten.

Some youth ministries are very effective in presenting one part of the gospel. They specialize in evangelism or social action or nurture or discipleship. It is not that they don't present the gospel; rather, they present only a narrow part of the gospel. What is needed is for youth ministry to realistically and honestly present the whole gospel. Young people need to be called to make a commitment to Christ, to be challenged to do something about their faith, as well as to be nurtured in their faith.

Youth ministry must be biblically based and theologically centered. For far too long we have obscured the truth. The whole gospel needs to be proclaimed. The truth needs to be told.

The "Unthinkable" (Proclaiming Hope)

Beth A. Richardson expresses what many young people are struggling with. "The Unthinkable" is becoming a part of our consciousness: We could be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust.⁶ The research done on early adolescence by the Search Institute bears out what Richardson expressed in her prose.⁷ For some youth, there is no hope of a future that they will participate in and be a part of. Youth ministry must proclaim hope in the face of ultimate destruction, whether that destruction comes from lack of jobs, hunger, or a nuclear accident.

For some communities, such as portions of the community of black adolescent males, there is little to be hopeful about. The unemployment rate is unbelievably high, the crime rate is astronomical, and the hope for a better tomorrow is almost nonexistent. Into this reality, youth ministry must proclaim a hope that is real.

The Undoable

Grant Shockley, in the Miller-Fondren Lectures at Scar-ritt, suggested that the youth group is one of the most racially segregated parts of the church and of society.⁸ Is this faithful? Is this the gospel?

For too long in youth ministry we have debated and perhaps even participated in activities designed to break down the barriers of prejudice and racial segregation. These attempts have done little, if anything, to break down the barriers of racial exclusion in our churches or our communities. We have not transformed the world but have been conformed by it. And even as I write this, I know of many youth ministries that think racism is not an issue that the church ought to be involved with, or that racism is not a problem in our culture.

The Unbelievable

Many Christians cannot understand that the United States is now a pluralistic society and that the United States shelters a multitude of religious beliefs and values. Yet youth ministry must engage young people in the task of living as Christians in a pluralistic society. It has to help young people understand the world community and the way they as Christians are called to relate to the world.

Basil Karp states that "several recent studies have shown that young Americans are woefully unprepared for the new global circumstances."⁹ Those in leadership positions in youth ministry—both adults and youth—must become educated to the growing interdependency of the global society and the increasingly pluralistic society in which we all live. Youth ministry must participate in the shaping of a new way of life that acknowledges global interdependence and our pluralistic society.

Certainly there are other aspects to being a faithful Christian in today's world. Each denomination and each congregation has traditions about what issues and concerns are the most important. This is how each congregation lives out its commitment to God. I have mentioned just a few areas that I believe are important for a local congregation to be involved with if one is to remain faithful. The issue of sexuality, the call of discipleship, and developing Christian leaders are all arenas that we ought to take into account as we look at what it means to be faithful. Too often churches don't examine the whole gospel in their attempt to do youth ministry.

In workshops that I lead, in classes that I teach, and in discussions I find a consistent theme that can be called the search for the "secret" of congregational youth ministry. Everyone wants to find the elusive secret so that they can then do youth ministry effectively and quickly. John L. Parker, Jr., in a novel entitled *Once a Runner*, explores this theme from a different perspective:

Over the course of several years at Southeastern as his fame grew, many undergraduate runners sought him out as a training partner, thinking to pick up on the Secret. Expecting all manner of horrific exertion, they were generally stunned and giddy to find they could so easily make it through one of Denton's calendar days. Showing up the second morning they were of good cheer, perhaps trying to imagine how they would handle the pressure of fame. The second day also went well, but they would begin to notice something peculiar. There was no let up. . . . On the third day his outlook began to Weaken. For one thing, he was getting tired. Very tired. No particular day wore him out, but the accumulation of steady mileage began to take its toll. He never quite recovered fully between workouts and soon found himself walking around in a more or less constant state of fatigue—depression. . . . The new runner would find it more tedious than he could bear. The awful truth dawned: there was no Secret!¹⁰

The secret of youth ministry, if it can be called that, is the constant, almost tedious, attention to the aspects of youth ministry that I have discussed. The persevering presence of the church as represented by its people, God's people, is the secret of youth ministry. I am convinced that through patient attention to the different aspects of youth ministry—intentional, relational, programmatic, and gospel—youth ministry will become truly effective in a local church setting.

The truth must be spoken. And it must be the whole truth. The truth must not be watered down or sugarcoated or obscured by our politics or theology. The truth must be spoken in love—love for the truth, for those for whom we speak, and for ourselves. Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave felt overwhelmed by all the work they would need to do in their congregation as they left the second training session. They had come hoping for a quick, easy solution (the secret), and they left realizing all the weeks of work that lay ahead. But they also left with a sense of hope. They had a sense of direction. They were going to pull together a group at the church and focus on the intentions for youth ministry. At the same time, they realized that they needed to combine a programmatic and relational ministry.

Perhaps by now you can see more clearly how in different congregations youth ministry could be very different and yet still be effective. The way each congregation will respond to being faithful will be different. What each congregation decides as its intentions may be different, the content of the program may be different, and the nature of the relationships will be different. However, if each congregation focuses on its intentions, its relationships, its program, and its faithfulness, youth ministry will be effective and "successful."