

CHAPTER 6

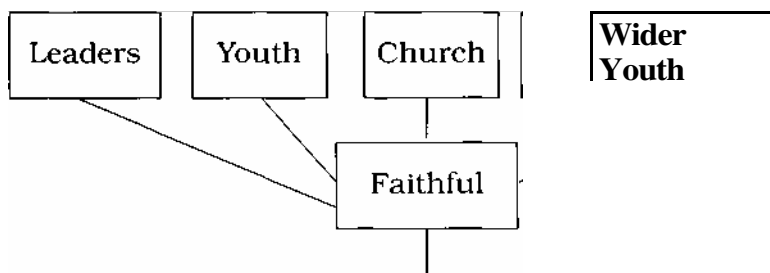
Choosing Topics and Developing Youth Ministry Programming

Dave, Jennifer, and Betsy were eager to understand how to build a "better" programmatic ministry in their congregation. They knew that a component of congregational youth ministry is program. However, too many people believe that the answer, or "secret," to their youth ministry is to find new and creative programming. They believe that if they can find the "best" program their youth ministry problems will be solved. Nothing could be further from the truth. Programming can aid an effective youth ministry, but youth ministry needs to be intentional, relational, and faithful as well as programmatic. Those who believe that program is the "secret" of youth ministry are in an endless search for the newest or latest program. They opt to buy all the latest "canned" programs or the latest material from their denominational headquarters or non-denominational publisher. They search endlessly to keep their cup of program filled from whatever well is available. Congregational youth ministry needs to pause and consider how to replenish the well that contains the water, instead of endlessly filling the program cup with whatever newest program is available.

We need to consider several issues in the building of appropriate and effective programming in congregational youth ministry. What follows is an attempt to have you look at how the well is constructed so that you can create your own well and not always depend on somebody else's "water."

Finding the Right Topics

There are at least four groups of people to be considered in the process of constructing the topics for programmatic congregational youth ministry: the congregational leaders and adult workers with youth, the youth themselves, the church (both locally and nationally, including parental concerns), and the wider youth community. The gifts, goals, needs, and objectives of each group should be taken into account in your planning. And every program should be "tested" against the standard of faithfulness—to the gospel and to the stated intentions of your ministry.



PROGRAM

Leaders

Both youth and adult leaders are the start of programming. They know what they can and cannot do. They know the intentions of the ministry. They will direct the program-building process. Their gifts are the beginning of an effective programmatic youth ministry. Their ideas and concerns around topics for the programmatic youth ministry are important.

Youth

Topics youth want to explore in the congregation's ministry to them are also important, but we must remember the difference between wants and needs. Effective programmatic congregational youth ministry takes into account the needs of young people as well as the quality and ability of the leaders. Programs that do not meet the needs of young people will not get their support. And ultimately a youth ministry that meets only the wants of young people, rather than their needs, will die because of its superficiality and lack of relevance.

Relevance is a key issue for youth ministry. It is difficult to remain relevant. But one of the crucial issues of the gospel is for people to rise up in every generation and express the gospel message in the language and images of the day. One of the greatneses of Paul is that he was able to express the gospel in the language and images of the people he met wherever he traveled.

Program that caters only to the wants of young people without exploring their needs in any depth will ultimately be irrelevant. We are to be faithful in our programming and our youth ministry. We are not merely an entertainment service, nor a babysitting service. While programs can be fun and entertaining, they must be faithful. We must help young people drink living water.

The difference between wants and needs can be perplexing one. One way of examining this issue is to ask whether the programs being suggested help youth put something back into the church and/or God's creation or simply take from the church and/or God's creation. If the program simply takes, it is probably a want rather than a need. For example, a trip to an amusement park gives back nothing to the church, while serving a meal at church may give something to the congregation (fellowship), as well as allowing the youth an opportunity to raise money.

Complicating the issue between needs and wants is the fact that different Christians and Christian communities view the needs and wants of young people, indeed of all people, differently. Does everyone need a personal relationship with Christ to be fulfilled? Some Christians would answer yes; others would say that humankind needs a relationship with God, which may or may not be expressed through Christianity.

Several surveys that attempt to get out what youth want in youth ministry are available. Very few of these are able to make the distinction between wants and needs, or if they do, you are placed in the situation of having to trust the judgment of the makers of the survey. Still these surveys are a good place to start. I would recommend *Determining Needs in Your Youth Ministry*, by Peter Benson and Dorothy Williams (Loveland, Col.: Group Books, 1987).

So programming must be relevant to the lives of youth. The crucial issues for youth are different in differing communities and parts of the country. While some issues are the same across ethnic, socioeconomic, and lifestyle boundaries, some issues are particular to individual situations. There are many ways of discovering what the "crucial" issues are for the youth in your community. Developmentalists, such as Erik Erikson, Lawrence

Kohlberg, and James Fowler, have helped us to understand these issues from their particular developmental perspectives. Others, such as Joan Lipsitz, David Elkind, and Joseph Kett, have brought the fields of history and sociology to bear in helping us understand the crucial issues for youth.' Many academic courses attempt to get at the crucial issues for youth by examining the work of these authors and others. Their contributions in helping us understand the "needs" of young people as well as their wants are profound and will continue to illumine us. Yet a program that is designed completely on theoretical knowledge can be stale and unimaginative. It can also hinder many adults from getting involved in youth ministry.

If one of the intentions of the congregation's youth ministry is to have youth actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of program development (and I believe it ought to be one of the intentions), it must be planned into the process. Youth can be active in program planning, in implementing the program, and in evaluating the program, but it takes time and effort. Having youth involved in all aspects of programming models a way of being in ministry that is participatory.

Nothing can help us understand the crucial issues for youth in a particular congregational setting better than simply listening to the stories, to the concerns, and to the rhythm of the life of the young people. It is precisely as the church, through its adults, enters into the world of adolescents by examining the work of theorists and by listening to youth themselves that the local congregation's youth ministry can discover the bonds of oppression that hold many young people captive and enslaved. It is these very bonds that need to be broken.

Church

Each local church is unique. It has unique needs as well as unique traditions that can be built upon and developed as program. Each local church has parents who have specific concerns and needs that ought to be an added ingredient in developing the topics for an effective programmatic youth ministry.

Besides the local church, many denominations have specific goals and concerns around youth ministry. These may be factored into the programmatic needs of the congregation's youth ministry. For example, some denominations are concerned with developing and fostering a sense of denominational identity, as well as Christian identity. This is a concern that can be addressed through the programmatic component of the congregation's youth ministry.

Some denominations have a well-developed confirmation program, and that is an important part of the youth ministry of the local church.

The concerns of the Church universal can also play a part as you begin to develop effective youth ministry programming. Is the ecumenical movement something that your church's youth ministry ought to be involved with? Do you want to focus on developing global citizens?

Wider Youth Community

Finally, consider the needs of those youth who are not directly involved in your church's ministry. This means making a careful study of the local as well as the universal situation in which youth today find themselves. No longer can the church ignore those youth who have not wandered in the door or been brought up in the church. Youth ministry, like any other form of ministry, has a missional, evangelistic, and social witness component. What are the needs of youth in the community in which you minister? What are the needs of youth in the wider global village that can be met in your congregation's

programmatic youth ministry? Can your church host international youth for the school year? Can your church try to develop a ministry to/with/by youth in another community?

Youth ministry in every local setting must have effective program or content that is developed from the needs of its leadership, its young people, its church community, and from the wider youth community. Program, like all of youth ministry, must be faithful in its content.

If the programmatic content for your congregation's youth ministry:

- is built upon the goals and objectives of the youth ministry
- takes into account the leadership gifts of the adult workers with youth
- takes into account the leadership gifts of the youth themselves;
- is designed to meet the needs of young people in specific situations
- is designed to respond to the needs of specific churches within specific denominations
- and responds to the wider needs of youth—

THE PROGRAM AND CONTENT WILL BE EFFECTIVE.

Young people will respond favorably to this type of program. A program does not have to offer just fun and games to attract large numbers of young people, or have an external reward system in place to have young people attend programmatic youth ministry. Unfortunately, much of what passes for youth ministry does not take into account these four constituencies when designing the topics for programmatic youth ministry.

Some youth ministry focuses program strictly around the adult leadership. These forms of youth ministry develop an adult-centered program that includes only what the adults want to do. If the adult is dynamic, knows youth well, or is very entertaining, these forms of programmatic ministries flourish and grow. However, most of us aren't that entertaining, dynamic, or know youth that well. Besides being an inappropriate form of youth ministry (see the section on ministry with/to/by youth), these adult-centered programs are usually not broad enough to encompass all of the concerns that different youth may have in any particular local setting.

Other programs focus strictly on the needs of youth. Many times, these types of programs confuse the needs of young people with the wants of young people. Thus they develop programs that are based solely on what youth want to do. Few of us "want" to be called into serious discipleship or commitment. Most of us "want" to fall into the sin of sensuality.²

While some of these programs seem to be very effective, very rarely do they attempt to relate youth to the larger community, whether that be the local church community or the larger Christian community. Often these types of programs set up the church or parents as the outside force that needs to be overcome. These programs build group unity by focusing on a common enemy, which is usually identified as parents, the church, or the larger society. In other words, these types of programs run the danger of creating a community of youth and a few adults against the larger community, whether that be parents or the church institution.³

Still other youth ministry programs are concerned with "our" youth. These youth ministries seem to forget that there are other youth in the community and the larger world whom the gospel calls us to witness to. Evangelism or mission may be forgotten in these forms of programmatic ministry, or they may be understood strictly in a foreign context and not in our own neighborhoods.

Thus a well-conceived youth ministry program will take into account the needs of the leadership, the youth, the church community, both locally and nationally, including

parents, and the wider youth community. It is as these "needs" are discovered or remembered and intentionally developed within the goals and objectives of the youth ministry that effective programs will be developed and implemented. Further, it is as these issues are explored that a church not only begins to "own" its youth ministry, but begins to see how all the parts of the youth ministry—Sunday school, worship, confirmation, youth fellowship, choir—come together and work for the glory of God.

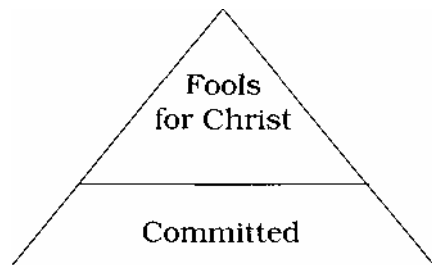
A significant part of the planning process is allowing enough time for the program to be planned appropriately with the best resources available. Many excellent ideas founder for lack of time to pull off the concept. Some of the best youth ministry programs operate with at least a nine-month planning time.

Many people in youth ministry take exception to this type of advanced planning. They want not only to fly by the seat of their pants but to allow plenty of space for the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet this means many times programs do not happen due to lack of insightful planning, because people or curriculum or finances cannot be put into place due to a lack of time. The Holy Spirit can be involved in the planning process even nine months in advance!

The Program Pyramid

If you have been reading youth ministry material for any time at all, you have run across a helpful concept that I have adapted to my own use, and that I call the Program Pyramid. Essentially this concept says that one program cannot effectively reach all the different commitment levels and places young people are in their faith journeys. These levels are not always based on age or school grade. So various programs need to address the various levels of faith maturity of the young people in your youth ministry.

I usually talk about this pyramid and "levels" in this manner:



Learners

Show-Up

The largest number of young people in this program pyramid are community young people. This level includes anybody in the community who could possibly come or be involved in a program. Obviously not everybody comes, but the possibility is always there. Because this group includes everyone, you have a real variety of young people in various parts of their faith journey.

The next largest group is the young people who actually show up for any type of program. Again, these young people will probably have varying levels of commitment.

From this point on we want to begin to make a differentiation not in terms of numbers, although the numbers usually continue to decrease as we climb the pyramid, but on faith commitment or place in their faith journey. Any type of grouping begins to suggest that some youth are "better" than others. This is certainly not the case. However, in order to develop effective programs for all young people, some sense of their commitment level, their past and present knowledge, and their place in their own faith journey is helpful.

Thus the third level is those I call the learners. These young people have an active interest in learning. They may not always be regular in attendance at programs. They may not always express their interest to learn verbally. But they are willing and recognize the need for some program to have appropriate content. They are willing to have program delve into real life and what the Bible or their faith or their tradition may be saying about their life.

The next level are those who are "really" committed. These tend to be young people who are very active in many aspects of their youth ministry. They are willing and able to be leaders. They use good judgment and challenge themselves and their peers to keep growing in their faith.

The top level on this program pyramid are the "fools for Christ." These young people tend to be the exceptional young people, like Trevor Ferrell, who as an eleven-year-old started a ministry to the homeless in Philadelphia.⁴ These young people, under the leadership of God's Spirit and God's church, have made an incredible difference in God's creation. These young people are wise in the faith beyond their years. Few of us may have the opportunity to learn and minister with these young people. However, they are around us, in our churches, and in our youth ministries.

What many youth ministries do in programming is design the program to meet the needs of only a portion of young people from the pyramid. Perhaps their youth ministry is focused only on the community or show-up type of young person. These programs call for little commitment and tend to continually introduce the church or the gospel to young people. On the other hand, some youth ministry programs are focused only on the committed and more highly committed young person.

Bill Wolfe, a past executive doing youth ministry in The United Methodist Church, has said that one of the problems for many young people who attend a youth ministry program for the first time is the language used in the church. He contends that these youth do not understand the language or the concepts that seem natural to us in the church. The youth don't know how to find the Gospel of John in the Bible. They don't understand what the Bible is or how to study it. These young people attend a program meeting for the first time and find themselves quickly "out of it" and, thinking themselves foolish, do not return.

Effective youth ministry needs to have programs that can focus on the various levels of the pyramid. Some programs ought to be focused on those who are more committed and ready to learn; others more on those young people who are still being introduced into the faith or being called to make a commitment to Christ. We make a mistake when we expect all of the youth to participate in all of the youth ministry programs. Youth need to be given the opportunity to join the youth ministry of your local congregation at the place where they are most ready. Then they need to be challenged to grow in their faith journey and to mature in their faith.

In some congregations the most committed young people tend to be peripherally involved in the youth ministry because there is little if anything that challenges them or calls for their commitment. In other congregations there is no way for those youth who are less committed or those youth who are from the community to find a place to start because the focus of the programmatic ministry is on the most mature young people.

Effective programming takes into account the different commitment levels of young people and provides programming for these differing levels. Effective programming is produced locally as a congregation creates its intentions for youth ministry. As the local congregation takes its intentions seriously it can begin to create effective programming. The local congregation is able to do this as it looks at its leadership and their gifts and potentials; the youth, their leadership, and their needs (as opposed to their wants); the church, including the desires of the parents and the denominational issues; and the wider youth community.

Many local congregations find that they are not equipped to completely create their own program. They turn to resources for their program. How to choose and go about this process is what we turn our attention to now.