Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry: A Personal and Practical Guide to Starting Right

BEFORE YOU DIG IN

This book isn’t about copying Doug Field’s first two years in youth ministry. It’s about making good choices so you’ll survive and become a healthy youth worker for the long haul. Most of the learning I’ve picked up over the years has come through failures. While you will certainly experience your own failures, I hope these pages protect you from some of the bigger ones.

Whereas my book Purpose Driven Youth Ministry is about building a better youth ministry, this book is about making you a better youth worker. It’s primarily about emotional survival so you’ll be around long enough to organize your ministry. This isn’t a how-to-manual. It’s a heart-to-heart talk to help you see some of the key truths, constants, and nuances that contribute to a big-picture understanding of youth ministry. I hope to give you practical ideas on how to succeed in your calling.

CHAPTER 1: COMMITTING TO THE ESSENTIALS

Youth ministry is often a long, tiring, unrewarding, complex journey. Longevity in our field is uncommon. Quick departures have to do with inadequate preparation and unrealistic expectations. Youth ministry—like the Christian life—requires both training and endurance. The foundation of your ministry is strengthened as you develop faith, skills, leadership, experience, character, discipline, and passion.

Top Ten Youth Ministry Commitments

I will move slowly. Making fast changes can appear arrogant or reveal a
maverick’s personality to your church. Instead of making immediate changes, keep a record of all potential changes that come to you. Hang on to the list, but realize you don’t have to apply all of the ideas that come to you. Prepare your heart before you try to change your church.

*I will regularly check my heart motives.* Most conflicts come from impure motives. If your motives are pure, you’ll be productive and contribute effectively. Regularly ask yourself, “Why am I really doing this?” Commit yourself to honest and regular evaluation of your heart.

*I will avoid the numbers game.* Obsessing over numbers feeds the myth that bigger is better. Bigger isn’t better; healthier is better. Understand your church’s expectations for success, learn to talk in terms of health rather than numbers, and surround yourself with those who serve God faithfully.

*I will avoid comparison.* When you compare, you lose. Either you’ll be filled with pride, or dejected because you don’t measure up. Comparison places what you know about yourself against what you don’t know about another. Nothing is as good as it looks from a distance. Your value as a youth worker must come from God’s unconditional love for you, or you will seek the approval of others.

*I will honor the past.* It’s tempting to try and make yourself look good by criticizing the past. Honor those who came before. Criticizing is easy, but character finds goodness and draws attention to it.

*I will focus on priorities.* Youth ministry never ends. You will have to manage your limited time and focus on priorities based on your church’s values and expectations. You must learn how to say “no”. Doing more isn’t good ministry; doing the right things based on your priorities is good youth ministry.

*I will pace myself.* Since youth ministry is never finished, you must learn how to take breaks throughout your day and week—places, moments, and people who provide refreshment. Draw up a list of the ways you get refreshed and make some time for them daily.

*I will serve.* You will likely be in a position where you lead and others follow. If you want to be a great youth worker, serve. Jump at the chance to serve in little ways and your youth ministry will benefit because of your character.

*I will be a learner.* All leaders are learners, because you can only teach what you know. Although it requires time, sacrifice, humility, and perhaps money, you must make time to read, listen to tapes, attend conventions, or discuss ideas with others. When you stop learning, you stop leading.

*I will pursue contentment.* Youth pastors tend to want bigger results in less time. This easily leads to discontentment and the resultant desire to leave your current ministry. Every option outside your church begins to look better. The grass isn’t greener on the other side; the grass is greener where it’s watered, so water your own grass. Pursue being content where God has you.

**CHAPTER 2: DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT**

Discouragement may be the single most powerful feeling that causes folks to prematurely leave youth ministry. The task of youth ministry is difficult, the hours are long, and encouragement is minimal. Discouragement may come from lack of respect, conflict, lack of support, difficult students, failed pro-
grams, your paycheck, or a host of other sources. Adding up these factors can influence how you feel about students, ministry, church, and even God. They can leave you feeling unworthy and alone. Discouragement is a reality in all ministry. Wherever there are people, sin exists. Where sin exists, there problems. Where there are problems, discouragement follows. But there is hope. God can use discouragement to mature you and increase your ministry effectiveness.

Practical Steps to Battle Discouragement.

Find a mentor. Someone who has ministry experience and understands youth ministry will be able to love and encourage you. Find someone older, wiser, who cares about you and wants you to succeed.

Have friends outside of youth ministry. You need relationships away from your youth ministry tasks, someone you can laugh with, exercise with, pursue a hobby together. Having your entire world be youth ministry leads not only to discouragement, but apathy as well.

Take a day off. It is typical in ministry to think, “I’m too busy to take a day off.” This is a non-negotiable for your personal health. Ask a friend or your spouse to keep you accountable in this area.

Schedule solo time away. Whereas a day off includes other responsibilities (the lawn, the laundry, etc.) a solo day is a ministry day away to focus on your heart and mind. Take a monthly day to reflect, regroup, and recharge. Dream about the future, evaluate your current efforts, enjoy creation.

Clear the piles. Discouraged youth workers are easily overwhelmed, even by clutter. At least three times a year get a garbage bag and clean out those piles of things you plan on reading someday, last month’s mail, and the 75 sticky notes decorating your desk.

Discouragement journal. A journal is a safe place to vent your frustrations and anger. At a later date, you’ll have something concrete to reflect on and see your progress.

Affirmation file. Whenever you receive a thank you note or any kind of recognition (believe me, it will happen!), save it in a file. You’ll find encouragement in difficult times by revisiting that file.

Make a commitment to last. When you say yes to God and commit to go where he leads, you won’t be tempted to leave each time you’re discouraged.

Ultimately, you must realize that not everyone will understand you and your ministry. Complainers come in all shapes and sizes. Understand that you are not alone in your struggles. Everyone in ministry has similar struggles. Identify and recognize the specific issues that get you down and regularly share it with others—your mentor, a friend, an online community. Realize that the depth of your discouragement is minimized by the depth of your spiritual life. We turn to this issue now.

CHAPTER 3: HOW DO I STAY SPIRITUALLY FRESH?

Mike Yaconelli once said the most important thing you’ll hear in ministry: “Your relationship with Jesus is your youth ministry.” Believe it. Many youth workers foolishly believe that if they’re helping
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others grow spiritually, they must be growing spiritually as well. Don’t allow increasing ministry to de-
crease your intimacy with God. Don’t let your service exceed your worship, or the depth of your
learning exceed the depth of your spirituality. Loving God leads to loving others, but loving others
doesn’t necessarily lead to loving God. If you can’t minister and remain spiritually healthy at the same
time, you may need to step away from ministry for a season.

Being connected to God on a daily basis is more important than any youth ministry seminar you attend
or any book you read. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that God wants your work more than he
wants intimacy with you. Do we believe Jesus’ statement that “Apart from me you can do nothing?”

Don’t ignore the warning signs in your spiritual life—loss of passion, physical fatigue, lack of prayer,
bitterness, relational conflict. Tell a friend and get the help you need to remain spiritually healthy.
It’s crucial that you frequently check your spiritual condition and deal with problems at the first sign.

Staying Connected

Attempts at giving specific guidelines for abiding in Christ often come across as uncomfortably legalis-
tic. What follows are some actions that have helped me. I hope they encourage you.

Pursue consistency. Do you have a consistent time and place to meet with God? Pick a time when
you’re at your best. Even if you start with just a few minutes, show up ready to be still and learn.
Make a commitment and keep your appointment. If you fail, make that commitment again and again.

Go public. Be courageous enough to invite a friend to lovingly ask you about your consistency, your de-
sire, and the quality of your time with God. Don’t ask if you’re not willing to be honest. This person
can offer you encouragement, inspiration and accountability.

Return to the basics. In Rev. 2:4-5, John exhorts believers to “do the things you did at first.” Can you
remember the joy you felt when you first began walking with God? Expectation and anticipation may
be the very things you need to jumpstart your relationship with God again.

Pursue variety. You may want to try new things to shake up your routine and ignite your passion. Try
journaling, solitude, singing, meditating on a single verse, a new devotional book, listen to a worship
CD, try a new Bible translation. The possibilities are many and varied.

Without God’s active presence in your life, you’re nothing more than an activities director for teenag-
ers. God is concerned about your heart. It’s the single most important gift you can give Him, your
church, and your students. Hearts that aren’t connected to Jesus don’t help in youth ministry. You
may be able to attract large numbers and create a flashy program, but lasting fruit will be absent. You
need a heart that is tender toward God and open to his leadings. You need to be in love with Jesus.

CHAPTER 4: WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS? BEING WITH THEM

Relationships are key to healthy youth ministry—relationship with Jesus, students, and leaders. Too
often, youth workers are seduced by the lure of designing an attractive program, but programs can’t
define a ministry. Programs only exist to build and strengthen relationships with God and each other.

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A program-driven approach will certainly increase numbers, but you’ll communicate to everyone involved that attendance, activity, enthusiasm, and games are what is important. Working on program details takes time, and if you let it, it will consume the time you set aside for personal relationships.

You Can’t Minister to Everyone

If your goal is for every student to be known, loved, cared for, and discipled, you must help others become ministers. If youth ministry is about adults loving students and pointing them to Jesus, then helping volunteers develop relationships with students is the pathway to healthy youth ministry. Not only do you not have the time to connect with every student, chances are your personality and interests won’t connect with every student either. But remember, even if you can’t personally interact with every student, you are being watched by every student. You are a model and can influence all with your words, attitude, and actions. Ultimately, you should shoot for spending 50% of your relational time with students, and 50% with your adult leaders, training and encouraging them to do the same. I encourage my volunteer leaders to think in terms of 5-3-1. Know 5 students, develop 3, and focus on 1. This takes the guilt away of trying to have a relationship with every young person.

Developing a Relational Style of Youth Ministry

To have a relational youth ministry, you and your leaders must work together to purposefully develop it. Make sure everyone on your team understands the following principles.

Understand the power of presence. Trust isn’t built by forcing your way into a teen’s world. Start by just showing up. Be there. Be patient. Be approachable. Your presence will communicate concern.

Take someone with you. Whenever possible, take students with you as you live your life. Shopping? Lifting weights? Washing your car? You’ll create opportunities to talk and lasting memories.

Ask strategic questions. Strategic questions take the focus off of you and allows a student to share as much as she’s comfortable with, while not simply responding with a one-word answer.

Learn to listen. Listening with good eye contact and appropriate facial expressions communicates love and concern. It says, “You matter to me. You’re valuable and worthwhile. I have time for you.”

Be real. There is much pressure in ministry to be perfect. Being appropriately vulnerable presents an honest picture of your journey with Christ. Your vulnerability will help your students shed their masks.

Know when to nudge. It is easy to focus so much on being friends that we never challenge our students. But this is necessary in disciple-making. If you have taken the time to listen and care, you will earn the right to confront when necessary and lovingly challenge them to develop new habits.

Establish boundaries. While being available is important, you should not try and meet every need at every hour of the day. Surely some crises will interrupt your life at times, but if you don’t learn the art of saying “No” or “Can we do this later?”, ministry will keep you from having a personal life.

Learn to refer. Most of us aren’t counselors. Our best tools are to listen, pray, encourage, and learn
to refer serious matters to a professional counselor when necessary. Don’t feel guilty about referring. Continue to love the teen and offer to help in finding an appropriate counselor.

*Understand the power of little things.* Five years from now, your teens aren’t likely to remember a single message you preached. But they will remember dropping by their workplace to say hi, calling on the first day of school to pray with them, sending notes of encouragement. Not every leader will lead a Bible study or preach a message. Everyone can pull off the little things.

Healthy youth ministries have relational leaders who love students and want to get to know them. They have shepherds, not chaperones. Don’t get overwhelmed by the number of students you have. Focus on a few. Others will do the same. Relational ministry puts people first.

**CHAPTER 5: BECOMING FAMILY FRIENDLY**

It’s not uncommon for youth pastors to see parents as the enemy and to fight feelings of insecurity and intimidation when dealing with them. We take a defensive posture in our attitudes, actions, and communication patterns. But it’s not possible to have a lasting influence on a student’s life if the parents aren’t connected to the same spiritual process as the church. Parents are the primary spiritual influencers of their children and it is crucial that you are committed to a family-friendly youth ministry.

**Develop Family-Friendly Habits**

*Understand basic family needs.* Families are busy and they need time together. Lighten up on the programming and minimize the nights you have students out. Be careful to not equate attendance at youth programs with spiritual maturity. Emphasize the importance of youth having a positive relationship with their families. Cancel meetings periodically for the expressed purpose of family time.

*Master communication.* The secret to winning with parents is to communicate clearly. At least monthly parents should receive information with dates and key details. The bigger the event, the farther in advance it should be communicated. Include the topics you’re teaching on in hopes that it provides communication fodder for families.

*A little thoughtfulness matters.* Go out of your way to encourage parents. Each week after a meeting find at least one parent and tell them something great about their kid. Send notes, emails, or texts of appreciation. Have a parent appreciation dinner once a year.

*Be relational.* Intentionally develop relationships with parents. Get to know them, care for them, listen to them, help them—just like you would with teens. Not only will your ministry deepen, you’ll send a message to students that parents are important and valuable.

**Allow Parent to Minister to Parents**

Parents can and should minister to other parents. Find at least one parent of a teenager to serve as a point person and oversee communication, plan parenting events, reach out to disconnected parents, and handle entry-level problems. If you don’t have teens yourself, don’t try to teach on parenting skills. Ask a parent or another pastor to help, or go with a video curriculum.
Caring for Angry Parents

Within every ministry you will find angry parents, for good reasons and for bad. How you respond determines whether you gain credibility or lose respect. Don’t avoid conflict. Listen humbly without interrupting or taking offense. Try to end on a positive note, letting them know that they were heard and understood, their input is appreciated, and that you will take steps to address their concerns.

You will also find yourself angry and disappointed with parents at times. Be slow to respond and resist sending off that flaming email. Never undermine parents or their authority by trying to get teens on your side. When there’s a conflict, go directly to the source.

Conclusion

Early in your ministry don’t worry about setting up a lot of programming for parents. Concentrate on keeping a proper attitude, building relationships with them, encouraging them, asking them how you can pray for them, and offering to assist them with the difficult tasks of parenting teenagers.

CHAPTER 6: CONFLICT—DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Conflict is inevitable in youth ministry because when imperfect people work in imperfect situations, problems arise. You will experience students, parents, and church leaders who don’t like your personality or your decisions. If you are young, conflict may arise from lack of support or trust. You may have insecure volunteers that try and compete with you. Perhaps you are micromanaged by your supervisor. And you will always have conflict arising from student behaviors.

It’s likely that in your ministry you won’t face roadblocks in programming concerns, but rather through interpersonal tension. You may encounter ridicule, rumors, or resistance. Your options are to ignore problems and hope they go away, try to please everyone in hopes of avoiding conflict, or deal with tough issues as they arise. Only the last option brings peace to your life and your ministry.

During Conflict. . . Be a Leader

The overarching principle I have learned in dealing with conflict is that I must be the leader God has called me to be. Go to the source of the problem with a grace-filled heart. Speak the truth in love rather than waiting for the problem to go away.

“But I don’t want to hurt their feelings.” You don’t have to be mean-spirited to be a leader, but the most healing balm is truth and truth often hurts. Your motive isn’t to hurt them but to lovingly help.

“I’m too young.” The issue isn’t age; it’s leadership. “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young” (1 Tim 4:12). Be the leader God has called you be and watch him use you.

Not everyone likes a leader. One of the toughest realities of leadership is that you won’t always be liked. Leaders must make decisions that will cause someone to feel hurt. Get used to it.
Give people time to change. Be slow to label people because they don’t agree with you. The person who is the loudest is the most insecure or the most passionate. Over time, and by creating a sense of belonging, the most difficult can become your most vocal proponents.

Watch for people’s strengths. Most people don’t express their opinions unless they have a desire to be part of the solution. Use their energy, honor their wisdom, and put them to work on a solution.

Turn the mirror on yourself. Don’t be afraid to ask, “What can I learn from this conflict?” “What truth is in this complaint or criticism?” Conflict will result in your growth if you let it.

A Model of Conflict Resolution

(a) Tension develops from a misunderstanding or personality difference. (b) Negative feelings result, such insecurity, frustration, or feeling threatened. (c) You have a choice to respond negatively in becoming defensive or (d) Positively by asking questions of yourself, the situation, and your responses. What is this conflict really about? What do my feelings mean? (e) Find a sounding board and bounce the facts of a wise, mature advisor. (f) Discuss the problem face-to-face with the source. Speak the truth in love about both the problem behavior and your feelings. Apologize where appropriate. Express your desire for resolution and healing. (g) Resolve the problem or make adjustments. If the tension is based on personality or value differences, you may need to redefine the boundaries of relating to the individual or include a third party for future conversations. (h) Peace results, our biblical goal.

This process will help you handle conflict, but it won’t eliminate it. Your ministry doesn’t have to be one endless tension after another. As you speak the truth and offer grace, you’ll build their character and integrity. You’ll reap a harvest of support, trust, and growth.

CHAPTER 7: UNDERSTANDING SUBMISSION AND SUPERVISION

A youth pastor will always have some authority figure to submit to. It takes skills and understanding to know how to work with people in authority. When I struggle in my relationships with those over me, it’s often because I’m criticizing others when I should be critical of myself. Attitudes that are selfish and demeaning are what give youth workers a bad reputation.

Lead Youth Worker: How to Work Successfully With Your Senior Pastor

Make sure you understand your pastor’s style of managing staff. You’ll benefit from someone who holds you accountable for your goals, provides insight into people problems, helps you craft vision, expects you to establish boundaries, and is available when you are in need of advice. While some personalities are controlling, most pastors don’t want to manage you. They want to trust you, believing that you’ll do the job you were hired to do. Most youth pastors don’t want a high-control manager. They want support for their leadership while having freedom to soar.

Actions to Avoid With Your Senior Pastor

Don’t drain your pastor. Be a breath of fresh air. Come to meetings with an agenda and be out of her
office as quickly as possible. Your pastor may be highly relational, but he has other responsibilities.

*Keep your problems your problems.* Can’t find a van for the upcoming trip? Ask another staff member or mentor. If it’s not critical, be able to solve issues within your authority yourself.

*Don’t expect a lot of your pastor’s time.* While you need to be mentored in ministry, it may not be by your senior pastor. Your boss may not be your pastor. Someone else may need to fill that role.

*Think big picture.* Consider youth ministry relative to the whole church ministry. Give up thinking that youth ministry is the most important ministry in the church. Be a contributor, not a competitor.

**Actions to Take With Your Senior Pastor**

Do whatever you can to make his life easier. You want him to know that he can trust you at all times.

*Care for his family.* Love his children and make sure they are being discipled. Value and protect his family time. Affirm him when he puts his family first.

*Support his dreams.* Be a listener who’s excited about what’s on her heart. Encourage her, affirm her, and let her know when she’s helped you. Be specific with your praise.

*Take the heat.* If you can protect your pastor by listening to a complaint directed at him, do it. Senior pastors need to know that others on the team will absorb some of the pain of ministry.

*Speak highly of your pastor.* Especially behind his back and in public.

*Inform, but don’t overwhelm.* Give her enough facts to stay informed, but without all the time-consuming details. Wait for her to ask for more before sharing all the interesting stories.

*Pray.* Make a commitment to pray regularly, specifically for your pastor. Periodically remind him that you’re praying for him.

**The Church Board and Youth Ministry Working Together**

To many, the church board conjures up images of bureaucracy and politics. You’ll want to know how to work effectively with your board. Respect the board, but don’t be intimidated by its members. Board members often operate on rumors and perceptions of the youth ministry, rather than fact. Find out how your ministry is perceived, then do what you can to reinforce positive perceptions and change negative ones. Invite board members to attend events or to be involved in the youth ministry where appropriate. Their perceptions will then be more accurate and they will be more supportive.

Get to know the board members; encourage and care for them. Pray for them. Keep them informed on an ongoing basis, and communicate that you care about the church’s success, not just the youth ministry. One of your roles as a youth pastor is to help your church board have a clear, positive image of your youth ministry. You can help redefine church politics as “the ability to gain support for the ministry God has entrusted to you.”

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CHAPTER 8: WORKING WITH A TEAM OF LEADERS

Healthy ministries rely on the gifts and talents of a variety of leaders. You need to be done with superhero, do-it-yourself, solo ministry. Your church didn’t buy a professional to entertain teenagers. Your role is to equip the saints to do ministry (Eph. 4:12). Learning how to develop and work with a team is the second most important aspect of youth ministry, after the spiritual health of the youth leader (see chapter 3).

Why a Team?

You’ll keep growing. Your ministry will stop growing if you’re ministering alone. You can only care for a few students personally. If all the responsibilities and needs are directed toward you, your passion will soon dissipate and you won’t adequately care for the students in your church.

You’ll have more energy and last longer. Most discouraged and fatigued youth workers are usually ministering by themselves. Doing everything alone is draining.

Your church is stronger. You’ll never accomplish as much alone as you can with a team. And Christians need a place to serve to be mature. The youth ministry is a spot that will stretch their faith.

Your impact broadens. Working with a team helps you reach different types of students. The more varied the ages and interests of your team, the more varied the students you’ll be able to care for.

Your ministry skills will increase. When you work with other leaders, you will continually learn by watching how each one works with students. That’s what a team does—sharpens one another.

You’ll have more fun. It’s more fun to do ministry together when you like each other and have shared experiences. Take time to just be together, eating, laughing, playing, relaxing.

How to Find the Right Teammates

Pursue clarity before pursuing people. Why should people join your team? What is the vision you offer? If you can inspire, you’ll motivate others with the thrill of working with students.

Know the type of leader you’re looking for. The best youth leaders are not the young, funny extroverts. You’re looking for people who love God, like students, and who want to be part of a team.

Master “the ask.” Ask clearly and specifically, giving people a chance to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Think in advance about answers to common excuses you will hear as objections. Don’t rely on bulletin announcements. They are ineffective and lack the power of asking in person.

Be visible. Everyone in church should know what a great youth ministry you have. Visibility results in attractiveness. Make announcements, have promotional materials at key locations.

Expect other leaders to help. Everyone on the team works to find other teammates. Challenge your
leaders to talk to at least one other adult each year about joining the ministry team. And don’t forget that students are your greatest resource in asking. When teens approach other adults about getting involved, their requests are often perceived as a special compliment.

*Be professional.* Have a pack of information that describes the program and includes an application. Schedule face-to-face interviews. This process communicates that you take the ministry seriously.

### Chapter 9: Investing in Student Leaders

Developing student leaders is a top priority. God often uses leadership opportunities to help teens develop self-esteem, find significance, and mature spiritually. Focus on developing student leaders, not on creating a student leadership program or leadership team. Ultimately, it is relationship with adult leadership that develops student leadership, not the latest curriculum, video, or conference.

#### Why Develop Student Leaders?

*Student leaders aid your ministry.* Effective student leaders advance the church, reach more people, grow in their own faith, and relieve adult leaders of some of their workload.

*Student leadership allows students to consider full-time ministry.* Interacting with full-time ministers and using their skills for God’s kingdom casts a vision for students to serve God vocationally.

*Student leaders will build your faith.* They will challenge, inspire, and convict you with their readiness to serve. Walking through trials together will cause you to grow stronger as they grow spiritually.

*Developing leaders is a biblical command.* We are to equip others to minister effectively (Eph 4:12) and enable them to reproduce spiritual life in others (2 Tim 2:2).

#### How to Identify Student Leaders

Jesus’ view of leadership is dramatically different from what the world teaches. His approach calls leaders to be servants. One of the ways I find potential leaders is to look for students who do jobs that others won’t: stack chairs, pick up trash, stay late to clean up. I look for students who reach out to shy or unconnected students and consistently offer unsolicited help to reach out to others. While servanthood doesn’t necessarily equate to leadership, it is a nonnegotiable characteristic. Don’t be mesmerized by up-front leaders. You’ll miss the potential of behind-the-scenes leaders (those who make things happen without being noticed) and skill leaders (those with music, art, technology abilities). The cute, fun, popular crowd need not be ignored, but maintain your standard of servanthood regardless of popularity. Battle favoritism by establishing objective, written leadership criteria for all to see.

#### What to Do With Student Leaders

Each student leader should have one adult pouring into her life (remember the 5-3-1 principle?) This doesn’t mean you ignore other students, but investing in leaders will maximize your time and energy since they facilitate other aspects of the ministry and help students get connected. Take them to leadership events you’re attending and give them copies of great books you’re reading. Hold them ac-
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countable for their actions. Students need to be lovingly challenged so they can learn and grow. Most importantly, model what you expect from them. You’re example of leadership will be the most significant part of their personal development.

How to Develop Their Skills

Start with small responsibilities. This will help build their confidence while decreasing the chance for them to make huge mistakes. For proven student leaders, provide multiple service options in various categories. Some may Work With Stuff (sound system, set up and clean up, making videos). Some will Work Up Front (testimonies, announcements, leading games). Some will Work With Others (counseling peers, leading a small group, following up with visitors). Coach and encourage them, but give them the freedom to accomplish their assigned tasks. A simple four-step process to develop students: I do it and you watch; We do it together; You do it and I watch; You do it alone and I train someone else.

CHAPTER 10: EVALUATING YOUTH MINISTRY PROGRAMS

Youth ministry programs need regular check ups to stay healthy. The danger of a “successful” youth ministry is the tendency to believe there’s nothing more to learn. The earlier you get in the habit of performing regular check-ups, the healthier your ministry will be. Here are four questions to ask:

*Have we identified the biblical purpose for this program?* Everything you do should fulfill one of the five biblical purposes in your youth ministry (worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship).

*Are we reaching our target audience with this program?* Your ministry will have different target groups, for example, Nonchurched, Churched, Christian leader. Is each program in your ministry effectively reaching the group that you are trying to target? Any one program typically frustrates people who aren’t part of the target. That’s OK. You can direct them to other aspects of your ministry.

*Have we met our intended outcome for this program?* For example, if the purpose for your small groups are fellowship and discipleship, you may set and monitor outcomes such as group interaction, studying Scripture, and personal sharing and prayer.

*Are leaders fulfilling their responsibilities for this program?* You must communicate the actions and attitudes you’re expecting so they will be shepherds instead of chaperones. What responsibilities do they have? Are they serving, leading, caring, and communicating effectively?

Four Steps to Answer Your Evaluation Questions

*Discern the real.* Objectively and honestly observe what is happening in a given program. Get input from others. Write down your conclusions and review them with a trusted mentor.

*Define the ideal.* Dream and create a picture of what the program ought to be. Pray for God’s direction and discernment. Learn from the creativity and wisdom of others and design your perfect program.

*Determine growth areas.* Compare the real with your ideal and identify the differences. List all the changes, every step you need to make to move to your ideal.
**Make adjustments.** Don’t get overwhelmed by your list of changes and steps. Decide what has to happen first and move forward. Change is so important that I’ve devoted the entire next chapter to it.

**When and What to Evaluate**

**Weekly.** At least once a week consider the condition of your heart and your spiritual health. Also assess how you spend your time. Are you overworking or taking time to rest and relax?

**Monthly.** Consider the quality of your personal relationships. What friendships need work? Who might need encouragement or direction? Have you left conflicts unresolved?

**Quarterly.** Review how you shepherd your leaders. Evaluate your special events as soon as they’re over, and do a review of all your main programs. Without regular evaluation you revert to autopilot.

**Yearly.** Challenge everything you do and justify its existence. Evaluate the effectiveness of your leaders and the spiritual health of all students. Evaluate all the written materials you give to leaders.

We’ve looked at four questions to ask in evaluating your programs, four steps of evaluation, as well as a yearly schedule for evaluation. Now take some time to evaluate your programs. You may have three awesome programs, but if they only fulfill fellowship and discipleship, you’re out of balance. Balance doesn’t happen overnight, but it won’t ever happen if you don’t evaluate.

**CHAPTER 11: HOW DO I MAKE CHANGES?**

Change has a way of making or breaking youth pastors. Some boldly and blindly make changes regardless of people’s responses. Others are paralyzed by the thought of suggesting change because they fear negative reactions. Here are a few basic truths regarding change:

*There is no change without pain.* Change will always bring feelings of loss, sadness, or disappointment to someone. Change scares people, even when it brings good results.

*People love to repeat the familiar.* “The familiar is comfortable; change is risky; So let’s do what we’ve always done.” One’s spiritual maturity corresponds with a willingness to consider change.

*Programs can and should change.* As our world changes, the church has to change methods without compromising its message. New problems require new solutions.

*Change requires flexible and faith-filled leaders.* Healthy youth ministries have leaders who are confident, humble, wise, discerning and flexible. They watch with faith to see what God might be doing.

**Understanding Seven Phases of Change**

*Personal preparation phase.* Leaders need time to prepare themselves spiritually to be sensitive to God’s leading. Too often we read a book or go to a seminar and get ambitious about change without consulting God. We must pray, listen, and ask hard questions about what we’re currently doing.
Youth Ministry Book Summaries: Your First Two Years

Idea phase. Be open to ideas from everyone; brainstorm many ideas. When leaders are connected to God, ideas flow. Don’t feel pressure to act on every idea. Wisdom is selecting from many good ideas.

Testing phase. Test your idea with a few safe people to get insights into the general reaction. Be open to all reactions, and be willing to let some ideas die if there is no support at all.

Question-asking phase. People will have questions. Make sure you’ve thought through answering them. What are your motives for this change? List pros and cons. Identify obstacles and the steps to overcome them. Know who your supporters will be and recognize your critics as well.

Selling phase. Be a leader and publicly introduce the change. Be positive and paint a picture of what the future could be like. Discuss obstacles and answer your critics’ concerns. (Remember, you’ve thought most of these out ahead of time in the previous phase).

Opposition phase. There will always be opposition. Go to them quickly to discuss their concerns. If they just can’t support you, ask them to maintain the unity of the church. If necessary, take someone else with you to talk to them. You’ll always have opponents and sometimes you just have to move on.

Waiting phase. The results of change won’t happen as fast as it did in your mind. Don’t worry about speed. Going too fast can hurt everyone. Don’t try to implement all changes at once. Be patient. It may take years to get to some of your ideas. Be dependent on God, preparing for the next change.

Don’t fear change; embrace it. Use change to strengthen your faith and your leadership skills. Help others feel comfortable with change so the next time you’ll be met with support and cooperation.

CHAPTER 12: A REALISTIC JOB DESCRIPTION FOR YOUR FIRST TWO YEARS

If you don’t know what’s expected of you, you’re doomed to fail. Expectations exist, whether spoken or not, and you need to discover them to be effective and stay healthy. Many youth workers accept positions with unrealistic expectations from well-meaning churches all the time. Their blind enthusiasm matched a church’s desperation to find a youth pastor. If you begin in ministry without truly understanding what’s expected of you and what’s realistic in your church culture, at best you can expect hurt and disappointment. At worse you can expect emotional abuse and to be fired. You must work through the following process of discovering expectations. If you have been in a position for a while, you can uncover these answers by simply asking for a review from your supervisor.

Tell. “Here’s who I am. I want you to know my strengths and weaknesses and what I have to offer.” Don’t try to hide weaknesses; acknowledge them and then identify the types of people you need around you to succeed. Say that you’re optimistic about learning new skills to minimize them.

Ask. What’s expected of me in this position? Who has those expectations (pastor, parents, elders)? How will these expectations be evaluated? Who oversees this position? What’s his management style? What does success look like? Ask the pastor, staff, key parents, volunteers, and student leaders.

Present. Share your priorities regarding your personal growth, the well-being of your family, and your
passion for this ministry position. You’re not demanding anything but rather painting a picture of how you’d like to pursue a healthy, balanced like as a youth worker.

**Identify.** Reveal your ideas regarding realistic ministry development within the first two years. Unveil your plan about what you think you can accomplish. Strive to balance your confidence and enthusiasm with the reality of the situation. Keep expectations realistic.

**Evaluate.** Take time to pray, think, and seek God’s leading. Talk with friends, spouse, and mentors to see if the church’s expectations line up with what you believe you can do with God’s help.

**Begin.** Begin with attitudes and actions that build healthy youth ministry or, if necessary, begin again somewhere else. At this point in the process you should feel confident saying, “This is what I need to do to serve God in this setting.”

**Getting to Work: Where to Start**

**Personal priorities.** Too many people are “former youth workers” because they did not give priority to their personal lives. Sadly, youth workers mostly receive praise for what they do and not for who they are. Have a consistent habit of spending time with God. Schedule several days a year to get away and seek God. Develop time management skills. Have at least one good friend outside of youth ministry. Make one full day off a week a nonnegotiable.

**Relationship priorities.** Get to know everyone in your youth group. Identify student leaders. Develop relationships with a few influential parents. Spend time with key church leaders. At least three times a year meet with people from your community that influence students.

**Leadership priorities.** Find a veteran youth worker who will meet with you regularly to help you in your leadership. Develop your process for bringing adult leaders onto your team. Develop a purpose statement for your ministry. Find a parent to oversee your ministry to parents. Ask a veteran leader for two book ideas for you to study regarding leadership.

**Program priorities.** Programs are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Use programs to help you fulfill your five biblical purposes for ministry. Establish calendar dates when you will take time to evaluate. Evaluate all your existing programs by defining target audience and biblical purpose. Pursue changes that move toward your purposes. Get rid of dead weight programs. Evaluate your teaching to ensure that it is understandable and practical for students.

It is my sincere hope that this book has given you words to encourage you, ideas to help you, and insights to motivate you as you pursue God’s call to disciple young people. Thank you for loving Jesus and loving teenagers.

If you are interested in my thoughts and comments, they are on the following page—->

__________________________________________ www.equippedyouthpastor.com ___________________________________
Doug Fields is my favorite youth ministry author. Everything he writes is top notch. If I were stuck on a desert island with only one youth ministry book, it would be a tough choice between this one and Field’s *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*. Both are indispensable. As he explains, one seeks to develop healthy youth ministers, while the other seeks to develop healthy youth ministries.

I so appreciate Doug’s writing style. He is humble, transparent, honest about his mistakes, funny, encouraging. These qualities don’t come through well in a summary. If there’s one youth book you decide to read through this year, I hope it’s this one. While Doug covers some of the typical youth ministry topics (working with parents, finding volunteers), this book is so valuable because he covers a number of crucial topics that simply not enough youth resources are covering—your personal health, discouragement, conflicts, change, relating well to your senior pastor. I couldn’t overstate how important this book is to the effectiveness of a healthy youth ministry.

Doug asks some of the best questions for personal reflection that I’ve seen. Each chapter ends with such questions, as well as questions for group discussion, and suggested action steps. All very valuable stuff. Also, there are numerous lists of practical ideas to implement the principles he’s presenting. Like “17 Ways to Find Volunteer Leaders” and “Ways to Make Your Youth Ministry More Visible to Your Church.” Unfortunately, these don’t fit into a book summary. If you are in need of such practical ideas, please consider picking up the book.

If I could fault this book anywhere it would be that it doesn’t really cover keeping a healthy balance between family and ministry—a crucial and foundational topic in youth ministry or any ministry for that matter. He mentions it in passing in the final chapter, but I think the topic is deserving of its own chapter. The best and most recent book on this topic is Brian Berry’s *As For Me and My Crazy House: Learning to Protect Your Heart, Marriage, and Family From the Demands of Youth Ministry*. I’m inclined to offer it via summary at some point, but it is very heavy on personal anecdotes, which are notoriously difficult to convey in summary format.