



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

08

The Youth Worker's
Relationship with Others

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Lesson Eight: The Youth Worker's Relationship with Others

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Relationships with Youth
- Incarnational Relationship Ingredients
- Relationships with Parents and Families
- Relationships with Other Adult Youth Workers

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Identify the vital components of incarnational-relational youth ministry.
- Explain the implications for this type of ministry with the parents and families within the youth worker's sphere of influence.
- Demonstrate an appreciation of the importance of modeling appropriate pastoral care with other adult youth workers.

Introduction

This lesson addresses the system of relationships in youth ministry. The relationships that will be addressed are those between youth ministers and workers and

- the young person (people)
- parents and families (including that of the youth minister)
- other adult youth workers

Lesson Body

Relationships with Youth

If ever there was a passage of Scripture that captures the heart of God for the relationship between the youth minister and the world it would have to be Philippians 2:5-11.

Philippians 2:5-11 (The Message)

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father

In this “Christ-hymn” Jesus is presented as the definitive prototype of a missionary God whose sole motivation was love, which acted in obedience to His Father to come to earth, be made a servant, and make the ultimate sacrifice in that obedient service. In this passage, the youth workers (and every Christian) possess the template for self-emptying love that was the trajectory of Jesus’ entire life. In this passage is a pattern of our life’s work.

God invites us to nurture the growth of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ in our lives and the lives of the young people with whom we work. Yet, it seems that this way of living can prove particularly difficult in our own homes at times. Perhaps this setting provides the most important place for God-bearing (or Christlikeness) to occur. With so much of what takes place in our homes influencing our ministries (for good or ill), perhaps the most vital place for us to mimic Jesus’ servant ways occurs with our own families and friends. Somehow it seems that these relationships represent part of the mystery of Jesus’ way. We cannot pretend, so we better be very serious about embracing Christlikeness in every aspect of our lives.

There is a saying, “Christians are a lot like tea bags, you never know what is inside until they are in hot water.” Working with young people will ensure that we will all find ourselves in some sort of hot water at some point (as will being a parent)! When we do, people all around us will find out what is inside. It would seem self-evident that when we cultivate this sort of “holy living” in our homes, that not only we will shape what is inside ourselves, but we will perpetuate Jesus’ example with those whom we love more than anyone else on the earth. May this way of living and being saturate all we do and are in our homes and ministries.

Chap Clark, in his book, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers*, observes that the defining issue for contemporary youth in North America revolves around “abandonment.” Youth experience this abandonment at work, in school, on sports teams, at church and even within families. Developmental psychologist David Elkind, in his book *Ties that Stress: The New Family Imbalance*, notes that postmodernity often leaves young people feeling victimized as they suppress personal needs for the sake of security and protect. They believe they must give in to parental and society expectations before they can become independent. Often, they turn this anger in on themselves (for letting themselves be used) or outward to the world.

Have we overlooked young people’s needs because we were only thinking about our own? Have we forgotten about the importance of the individual young person in favor of the crowd? Have we “stepped” over the hurting young person in order to get assignments done?

Incarnational Relationship Ingredients

To talk about incarnational relationships is to say that we want Jesus to be at the center of our relationships. To define incarnational relationship with young people there are at least three required ingredients. Those are

1. Authenticity
2. Integrity
3. A John the Baptist mentality

Authenticity

In being authentic the youth worker should not attempt to be anything but exactly who they are. The literal translation of the Greek word, “hypocrite,” means “mask wearer.” This term describes precisely the opposite meaning of being authentic. When an adult (or anyone) “puts on” an identity other than who they actually are that person is “acting” rather than being. This is what is literally meant by being a hypocrite.

There are lots of reasons why an adult youth worker might sense a temptation to fit in with the local youth culture by mimicking youth in a particular way. However, when the adult acquiesces to this temptation they, “sell out (or forfeit) their adulthood” and lose their greatest asset in their relationship with the young person. Wayne Rice (co-founder of Youth Specialties) has a saying: “A young person will gravitate toward the oldest person in the room that will take them seriously.” Not only is it unnecessary, it is counterproductive for the adult to be anything other than an adult in the life of the young person. Most young people do not need more adolescent friends. They need adult friends and mentors who take them seriously and offer youth a perspective and outlook far beyond that of their contemporaries. A relationship built on trust, mutual respect, and equality allows the young person access to the maturity of an adult through a safe environment often guaranteed by that selfsame mature adult. For the adult to be anything but “adult” is to abandon the very characteristic that is most important to the young person in this relationship.

For this relationship to be relevant, the adult must enter (as Jesus in Philippians 2) the world of the young person. They must go where young people are, spend time with young people on “their turf” (their context) and model appropriate love, vulnerability, and understanding. Most of all, adults must listen to young persons and truly seek to hear the “words between their words” (their implicit meaning) in order to foster understanding and pastoral care. It is this sort of modeling of what an adult looks like in front of young persons that not only offers them hope but healing relationship. For this relationship to be truly authentic it must not require anything of the young person but their friendship in return. If there are conditions then further abandonment is the result.

Integrity

The ingredient of integrity is closely associated with authenticity. Jesus reminds His listeners in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5—7) of the importance of keeping our word. However, Jesus’ message for us does not ask us to “prove” our sincerity through oaths or any other sort of verbal gymnastics or games. We simply allow our “Yes to be Yes, and our No to be No” (Mt 5:37). This sort of “word keeping” precisely provides evidence of one’s integrity.

However, integrity is much more than simply keeping one’s word. Integrity defines a way of living that seeks in all things to be whole and uncompromised. With regard to the youth worker, the implications of this way of living remain quite evident. It means that the youth worker maintains constant vigilance not only about their own conduct but also about even the appearance of impropriety to those outside of the immediate relationship. Although it may prove

near impossible to always avoid doing or saying anything that will not open the possibility of misinterpretation such propriety defines the life of the person of integrity.

For example, the youth workers must be above reproach with regard to financial dealings and with relationships with young persons—especially of the opposite gender. In order to do this well, youth workers are strongly advised to involve other mature, Christian adults in all situations that require leaders to handle money and when chaperoning an overnight activity with youth. These are simple safeguards that cannot be ever ignored in doing ministry. According to Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, people are most vulnerable to failure when they see themselves beyond a particular sin. In maintaining integrity, we choose to always involve the counsel, presence, and help of other trusted Christian adults of integrity in important situations and decisions. Youth ministry is NOT an individual sport—nor is ministry of any sort.

The John the Baptist Mentality

Youth ministry can provide quite a boost to one's ego to enter the world of the young person successfully and establish meaningful relationships. This role seems like being a missionary to a different culture other than one's own. People effectively navigating in this "new world" can find themselves the recipient of considerable attention and becoming quite important to a young person (or group). With this adulation, the reality of ministry takes hold, calling youth workers to closely pattern themselves after John the Baptist.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark we encounter John the Baptist. He bursts onto the scene with a prophetic message and a crazy diet and attire to back it up. People were swarming to him from the "whole Judean countryside." He was gaining significant popularity and prominence. However, John never lost sight of who he was. He never confused his role and the role of the one true Savior—Jesus Christ. John the Baptist demonstrated this type of attitude in John 1 when it is recorded that John the Baptist encounters Jesus he says of Him, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" and a few verses later some of John's own disciples follow Jesus. It is also why in John chapter 3, when asked by his own disciples about Jesus, that John says, "He must become greater; I must become less."

It is precisely this sort of mentality that must be that of the youth worker. We must ALWAYS point young people—and all people—to Jesus and NOT to ourselves. This is a very real temptation for anyone that becomes the focus of the attention of others. In fact, John is asked by the "priests and Levites" (Jn 1:19) about his credentials. They wonder if he is "the Christ" or even "Elijah" he denies both. The point here is simple, John does not see himself as more than he actually is (in fact he does not even grasp all that he is) and properly points all who follow him to one that is "greater" and one whose thongs of His sandals he is "not worthy to untie." John displays such humility and clarity of purpose and identity! May all of us involved in this critical ministry with the lives of young people maintain such understanding as John the Baptist.

Relationship with Parents and Families

Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, emerged from the largest study ever conducted on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in the United States. In excess of 3,300 students, and their parents, were involved in telephone surveys in a nationally representative sample. Both English and Spanish speaking persons were surveyed. Further, researchers conducted 267 in-person interviews across the country. The research that went into this study was conducted during 2001—2005 through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The noted sociologist Christian Smith was the architect of the study.

Smith lists eleven points in his concluding chapter. Among his findings are some encouraging observations, such as the great value that most young people place on their faith system and the statistical difference that religiously grounded relationships make in an adolescent's life. The largest observation, however, reaffirmed that the single most important influence on the spiritual life of youth were parents. In other words, young people will most often look like the religious and spiritual life of their parents. The bottom line of this observation states; if we are not engaging parents in spiritual growth our attempts to engage their adolescents in spiritual growth may simply be temporary phases the young person goes through.

Failing to enlist parents in their youths' spiritual growth contributes, at least in part, to the reason why so many young people in the United States graduate from high school—and Christ's Church—when they reach age 18. I wish I could tell you the “answer” to this situation, I cannot. I do not know what it means for all of youth ministry—let alone exactly how to deal with this in my own church. Maybe it is time for us to take seriously ministering to youth and their parents. If Christian Smith is right, and I believe on this point he certainly is, then youth ministry must meaningfully engage the parents of the young people we are seeking to influence for the Gospel. Maybe cultivating parent relationships can happen with the smallest of adjustments to our programming . . . maybe it means that youth ministry needs a radical makeover. Regardless of the cost, I am absolutely convinced that something must change with the way we minister to and with parents.

It may be necessary for us to re-learn what it means to be youth workers. We are not adequately able to do all forms of ministry and need to develop partners in ministry that can. Simply said, *Soul Searching*, makes clear beyond any denial that youth workers must focus on parents, as much as young persons, as part of their ministry. One simple corrective involves inviting parents—really involving them—in what is already going on in the ministry. Whether as guests, participants, or even sponsors, parental attendance and participation in the spiritual formation practices of the youth group substantially influences the spiritual growth of youth and adults.

Of course, this suggestion does not solve all problems. It will take much more than simply inviting parents into the current structures and experiences of the youth. However, these invitations provide a good start and such participation would likely shape the type of activities in which the youth were involved. In any event the spiritual lives of the parents and families of youth must be a part of the youth worker's “job description.”

The Family of the Youth Worker

There is much that could be said about the family of the youth worker, particularly those who are married with children. The subjects under this concern could range from the importance of family devotions, to involving the spouse in ministry, to the need for the family to be supportive of the youth worker, etc. However, the single issue that I want to raise here is simply that the youth workers' family is their first ministry priority. Without this primary objective of first taking care of one's own household (in an authentic, integral, and self-emptying-love-sort-of-way), all of one's "outside" achievements are worthless.

Paul writes to Timothy of the qualifications for both overseers and deacons in his first letter to his young follower. In both of the lists of qualifications Paul mentions the family as an important indication of the person's fitness to be a leader in the church. Elsewhere, Paul writes to the Ephesians of this same topic. He warns the Ephesians of the critical importance of the relationships of husband to wives, wives to husbands and of each with their children. These relationships ought to be saturated with all of the very same characteristics of good youth workers. They must be persons of love, integrity, that listen and put the needs of their family above that of their own. What use is it to be a beloved youth worker if our own spouses and children have not learned from our example to love and serve the LORD Jesus?

Single youth workers often overlook this important question. However, our relationships with current family often reflect our ability to form intimate relationships throughout our life. Whether our immediate "family relations" involve only extended family and close friends, how we respond to the needs of those people close to us often reveals our ability to balance ministry during the crucial moments in our lives.

Relationships with Other Adult Youth Workers

"Youth ministry requires a team approach." These may be self-evident instructions but they are important to state clearly. There is no way one adult can meaningfully minister to more than a handful of young persons. In other words, if there are more than 4-6 students in a youth group, youth workers will find it vital to have others involved. Further, even if there are only 4-6, it is important to involve at least another person, in upholding one's integrity and purity.

Kenda Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, use the story from Numbers 11 to remind us of the importance of "sharing the mantle" of leadership with others as youth workers. In this chapter Moses comes to within a moment of complete burn-out as the leader of Israel. He finds himself daily the mediator of disputes and the judge in innumerable decisions for this enormous group of persons he has been commissioned to lead out of Egypt into the desert. He realizes, finally, that he cannot do it by himself. He first complains to God as if it is His fault . . . God answers that Moses ought to lead through delegation (my paraphrase). And so, God instructs Moses to,

Summon before me seventy of the leaders of Israel. Bring them to the Tabernacle to stand there with you. I will come down and talk to you there, I will take some of the Spirit that

is upon you, and I will put the Spirit upon them also. They will bear the burden of the people along with you, so you will not have to carry it alone (Num 11:16-17, NLT).

Moses follows God's instructions and his burden is relieved. The importance of gathering the elders was not for the benefit of Moses, but for the benefit of Israel because they would have lost their leader had something not changed.

The importance of personal character cannot be overstated. It is more important to be short-handed than to bring in the “wrong” type of adults. An elder in ancient Israel was someone of experience and a person that others respected. These are vital characteristics of anyone in ministry. Too often the stereotypical youth workers are young, “fun”, perhaps “athletic” and male. These descriptions do not fill the Numbers 11 vision of proper leaders for the people of God. Instead leaders are called “elders” and their qualification and empowerment comes from the “spirit” God places in them. Let us look for this same “spirit” when we seek other adults to work with young people.

Another important value of the adult volunteer team of youth workers is the modeling healthy relationships (between adults) that can be a natural outcome. When a team of likeminded Christian adults comes together to love a group of young persons toward Jesus powerful modeling on several fronts takes place. Not only do the young people realize there are a number of adults seeking them out in their own context with authentic, and self-emptying love, the youth also witness these adults showing that same love, respect, and kindness to each other. This can be revolutionary in the lives of young persons who, today, may be surrounded by marital discord, bickering siblings, and the news reports of antagonism between various factions all around.

Adult volunteers provide the type of support for the youth ministry, and each other, that only comes from persons who “really understand” what we face in youth ministry. Often, we have much in common with these people who serve not only as our partners in ministry, but also as some of our very best friends.

Every follower of Jesus is called to live “in His steps” as Peter’s first epistle reminds us. All followers of Jesus ought to pattern their living after His example—summed up at the beginning of the session in Philippians 2:5-11. Of course, the middle section—the part about death—does not appear to be very encouraging and obviously quite different from our traditional understanding of “fun,” associated with youth ministry in many contexts. However, our sacrificial journey of love does not occur in isolation. When we join with youth, families and other adult workers we make this journey together.

Application

Interview two to three people in your local congregation and ask them for their definition of the church. In their context how do they understand their relationship to the local congregation?

Speak to various other adults in your congregation about their willingness or unwillingness to serve as adult volunteers in youth ministry. Use the conversations to help build a philosophy of team ministry.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Who is someone that is a living example of the Philippians 2 passage in your life?

How have you (or someone you know) displayed authenticity, integrity, or a "John the Baptist" mentality in your ministry, or can you give possibilities when you or others have been tempted to not demonstrate these characteristics?

How did your own parents model love and respect to you in your family?

Share the example of a minister's family that you know who models these characteristics well.

What might be some other positive natural outcomes of involving a "team" approach to youth ministry?

Would it be important to involve people on this team different from yourself? Why or Why not?



Nazarene Youth International

