



EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY

Youth Ministry Life

A Daily Dialogue About Things That Matter

Copyright © 2012 Simply Youth Ministry

group.com

simplyyouthministry.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without prior written permission from the publisher, except where noted in the text and in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, visit group.com/customer-support.

Credits

Authors: Kurt Johnston and Joshua Griffin

Executive Developer: Nadim Najm

Chief Creative Officer: Joani Schultz

Copy Editor: Rob Cunningham

Cover Art and Production: Riley Hall and Veronica Preston

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.



YOUTH MINISTRY LIFE

A Daily Dialogue About Things That Matter

BY KURT JOHNSTON & JOSHUA GRIFFIN



FROM THE WRITERS OF
simply youth ministry **today**

AN **EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY**
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

Contents

Introduction	i
The Philosophy of Youth Ministry	1
The People of Youth Ministry.....	19
The Practice of Youth Ministry.....	51
The Personal Aspect of Youth Ministry	65
Closing Thoughts.....	91

Introduction

Knowing that youth ministry requires a daily—sometimes hourly—commitment, we've pulled together some content from our Simply Youth Ministry Daily emails to help you navigate four major areas of ministry for every youth worker.

All youth workers deal with the **PHILOSOPHY** of youth ministry—why we do what we do and what difference it is making for God's kingdom.

There are the **PEOPLE** in youth ministry—those we are serving and those who are serving alongside us.

The **PRACTICE** of youth ministry is all about the how—programming for the most effective reach.

Then there's the **PERSONAL** aspect of youth ministry—how and why we need to grow and strive for personal and spiritual health as the point people of our ministries.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

What Does It Mean to Be “Called” by God?

The “calling” to youth ministry sounds so mystical—that God would pick out some normal person and make them super special for ministry. God’s voice must sound a lot like Morgan Freeman’s voice—and it’s probably accompanied by a bright light, an audible voice, and smoke and lasers. For many of us, that’s how it feels to be handpicked by the Creator of the universe for this special job, this amazing assignment of youth ministry.

For most of us, the ministry calling doesn’t feature any Hollywood allure and isn’t super magical, but it is life-changing. Here are some thoughts on our calling to youth ministry:

JOSH: My first inclination that God was calling me to youth ministry was through a significant mentor in my life. It was my senior year of college and I was about to graduate, and Jerry Dorman told me he was about to leave his current position at the college and become a pastor. He asked me to consider becoming his youth pastor. I couldn’t believe what he was asking (I was newly married and about to graduate with a business degree) but said I would pray about it. Little did I know

that this nudge from a caring adult in my life would lead to a lifelong pursuit and calling from God to minister to students.

KURT: Like Josh, the first time I truly felt “called” to youth ministry was through a significant mentor, and it was a fairly powerful moment. (More on mentors in our Personal Aspect of Youth Ministry chapter of this book.) I had taken a semester off from college to go on an extended mission trip to England. My prayer before leaving was, *“God, I don’t want to return to school until I know exactly why I’m there.”* I hadn’t told anybody about that prayer, but one night on the trip, while the team was huddled together under Big Ben praying for those we had ministered to throughout the day, my youth pastor pulled me aside and said that he believed I was gifted for ministry and should consider changing my course of study when I returned to school. No lasers, no Morgan Freeman voice, but pretty epic nonetheless.

Do you remember your calling? Maybe you were raising your hand to ask a question and someone thought that you were volunteering to work with junior highers. Maybe you accidentally made eye contact with your senior pastor

at exactly the wrong time and you ended up running the youth group for the next year. Or maybe you had a very provocative Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus meeting where God shone a blinding spotlight directly at you. Maybe you stumbled into youth ministry and have felt God's calling over the months of serving and seeing lives changed and hearts being drawn to God.

At the end of the day, you are called. You are chosen. You are one of the few...the proud...the youth ministry nation. Many share that calling, and we stand alongside one another as we impact the kingdom of Christ by influencing students and their families. Never take the calling lightly.

Youth Ministry Is a Life of Extremes

Youth ministry is extreme, and it requires a calling that's extreme—even if the method of our call wasn't filled with sonic booms and strobe lights! These are just a few of the “extremes” we have observed in our youth ministry callings.

Extreme schedule

In youth ministry there is no such thing as a typical week. Quite often every day is completely different from the last. This summer alone I (Kurt) ran from event to mission trip to vacation to camp to—I don't even remember what came next because the schedule was so extreme. It was even busier for Josh; in addition to all the youth ministry stuff, he had to schedule time to play video games, watch *Star Wars*, and snack on pretzels.

Extreme emotion

Youth ministry lives on both ends of the emotional continuum. I (Josh) have been sitting with students laughing my head off about something one minute—and the next, taking a phone call about one of my students being in a terrible car accident. Youth workers are there when things are extremely good and when things are extremely bad.

Extreme salary

Youth ministry pays extreme. Extremely little.

Extremely critical age

Youth ministry is focused on what may be the most critical age group in our churches—when students are

figuring out themselves and their faith, and when parents are at the most challenging point in relating to them.

We ask these students to give over total control of their lives to Jesus. We invite students to be baptized and to demonstrate their faith to their friends, family, and the world at the time when peer pressure and image are the most crucial in their lives. That's extreme!

Extreme expectations

There's a lot of pressure on youth workers—from senior pastors, staff, parents, and largely from the person who is the hardest on you: yourself.

Extreme hours, extreme emotions, extreme work. Youth ministry pushes everything to the limit. So why in the world would anyone want to do it? Seems like a nice, safe, well-paying 9-to-5 job in an air-conditioned office is what most people look for in life, not this. Why follow this path? Because although youth ministry is a calling of extremes, it also hosts extreme fulfillment. When we see families transformed, lives changed, destinies altered forever—this lends balance to the other extremes in our calling.

Your Calling Truly Matters

Because youth ministry is a ministry of extremes, calling becomes paramount. Here are three reasons why:

Calling keeps us humble

As much as we would like to take credit for it, it isn't our youth ministry. We live it, we breathe it, some might even take a bullet for it—but “our” youth group doesn't exist. Always remember that God has given us stewardship over a section of his kingdom. (God can remove that stewardship from us at any given time—ultimately, it belongs to God!) If ego gets in the way, it is the beginning of the end. Remember the call and acknowledge that it is all God's.

Calling keeps us focused

We care deeply about our youth ministries, not because of what we're building but because of the calling. If something is broken, we fix it. If someone needs attention, we are there for that person. We serve in youth ministry because our calling binds us to a central focus; giving it less than our undivided attention feels like cheating.

Calling keeps us going

When we take calls from upset parents, make hospital visits we would rather avoid, conduct funerals for teenagers, and hear confessions that make our blood run cold, it's the call that keeps us grounded. In weeks when everything feels extreme, the call reminds us that we also baptized two students and watched God begin restoring a teenage girl. The call gives us a front-row seat to lives being transformed. We are called to this. And, because we are called, God will give us the strength, wisdom, and desire to continue when the call is extreme.

Have You Checked Your Vision Lately?

The calling to youth ministry is amazing. And because we know that calling, we are quick to adopt God's equally amazing vision for what can happen in the lives of students and their families.

Use this "checkup" to give some clarity and purpose to your youth ministry call. A perfect question to start with is "Why does our youth ministry exist?" Clearly defining why your ministry exists will help you avoid being tossed

about by the most recent trends, the coolest fads, and the loudest voices.

There are lots of healthy debates surrounding purpose, philosophy and how to do youth ministry. So identifying the purpose of your youth ministry is crucial. Knowing why your ministry exists...

...helps you say no to good ideas

There are no shortages of good ideas in your church, and week after week you probably get inundated with really neat things your ministry could be doing. “What if we added an on-campus component to our ministry?” “What if we did service projects every weekend?” “Why don’t we do overnights anymore? They’re awesome!” Knowing why you exist helps you say no to ideas that are great but don’t fit with what God has called you to do or who God has called you to be.

...helps you stay focused on a clear goal

Making cuts and course corrections to your youth ministry is never easy, but when you have a clear purpose, it allows you to zero in on what is most important. If it isn’t mission critical, it is gone.

...gives your volunteers clarity

A clear purpose also allows your volunteers to have specific direction on an ongoing basis. A clearly defined purpose gives them something to refer to when they begin to question a decision or direction.

Much like calling, sometimes the vision for your youth ministry is the only thing keeping you focused on what God wants you to do!

Values Bring Vision to Life

If vision is the “skeleton” of youth ministry, then core values are the “skin.” The vision (skeleton) provides the foundation; the core values (skin) hold in all the vital parts. (Don’t worry. Programming—coming soon to a chapter near you!)

Over the past several years we’ve begun to identify four key values that run throughout our entire student ministry. We want these four things to show up in our large group program on the weekend, in our small group program during the week, and in all of our events, trips,

and even one-on-one interactions with students. It's the "skin" that embraces all we do.

Real

Students have the uncanny ability to sniff out the least bit of inauthenticity. If you're faking it, they know it. We want our large group time to be filled with failure stories and real-life transparency. We hope that our small groups are hitting on real topics that matter to students and that real-life authenticity is being shared in each group. We want students to know that they can be who they are without the need to wear a mask or put on a spiritual performance.

Relational

Our student ministry must be relationally strong. While programs are important, there is nothing better than one-on-one time with students. We want to share in relationships and be personally involved and invested in the lives of the students God has entrusted to us. We value people over programs and do everything we can to constantly provide opportunities for relationships. (Note: If relational ministry is one of your core values, recognize that it might be easy at first, but as your ministry grows, it

becomes tougher. Don't take relational youth ministry for granted. It doesn't always happen automatically!)

Relevant

One of the strongest assets in youth ministry is the ability to relate the timeless truths of God to the teenage life. You've probably heard the old saying, "It's a sin to bore teenagers with the gospel." Making relevance a key value helps ensure that you never commit that particular sin! Being relevant doesn't mean you have to be super trendy, memorize the latest Lady Gaga song, or keep up with the Kardashians. It simply means you create ministry experiences that are relevant to the life of a teenager. Our ministry must matter to students and hit them where they live their lives.

Relaxed

It is our hope that students walk into our youth room and breathe a sigh of relief! That their shoulders would drop as the tension is released from their bodies. That the worries and pressures of teenage life would fall from them, even if only for an hour or two. We want the urgency in our steps, the pace of our conversations, and the environment we create to be relaxed and unhurried in every way.

The skin—core values—will define how the ministry “feels.” So do you know what your personal core values of ministry are? Knowing who YOU are in ministry enables vision statements and core values to take flight. We each have a ministry DNA that encompasses our spiritual giftedness, what our passions are and how we express them, and lessons we’ve learned along the way. Those DNA strands help us navigate things like values, vision, and method.

Knowing yourself helps you communicate the “whys” of your passion and practice in a more authentic, realistic manner—and people connect to that.

I (Darren) have some core values for myself in ministry, and they guide how I do ministry—and in some cases, they find their way into the skin of our youth ministry, too.

Take risks

I’m not much for hanging off the side of a mountain or jumping off bridges with a rubber band around my ankles—but when it comes to ministry, I don’t want to ever be immobilized by fear of moving forward or failing big. *This value helps me jump into ministry opportunities that seem impossible.*

Embrace failure

This has been a recent addition to my DNA. I like ministry in a pretty, bow-embellished package. It rarely looks like that, though. And I want to model for my students what it's like to fall flat on my face, get up, say "I meant to do that," and try it again! *This one releases me from the urge to say no because I might not be able to do it—and I've come to love it in recent months.*

Live transparently

I rarely hide my struggles. I may manage how they're exposed, but I don't withdraw from the honest, ugly life. *It helps me show the Jesus life, even when I'm not getting it exactly right.*

Everyone's called

I believe everyone's called to youth ministry; they just don't know it yet. I live like it's my mission to help them embrace their places in student ministry, wherever that may be. *This core insight helps me see the value in every single person in my church.*

There is more, but I won't bore you with all the other details of my DNA. It's important for me to know what my

DNA is because it colors how I move forward in ministry. What's important is that you know about yours.

Take some Sabbath time to really pray through what makes you tick in ministry and why you are doing youth ministry the way you do it. Remind yourself about your call. Focus on your call and the core values of your youth ministry, as well as your own personal core values.

Some Things in Youth Ministry Won't Change

Though youth ministry seems to be in a constant state of change as we all try to keep up with trends and teenagers, there are some things that don't change. Your calling and core values may require a little adjustment from time to time. Your practice and methods will require adjusting (more on that in a later chapter). But with all the talk about youth ministry changing drastically in the future, there are a few things that shouldn't change—at least not any time soon. They should be intertwined with calling and core values.

Caring adult leaders

Great volunteers have been a part of youth ministry for a long time—and they will continue to be in the future. They

form the inner circle of leadership for your youth ministry. They are your partners, friends, and co-laborers in the faith. Youth ministry will change, but the need for people who love God and love students certainly will not.

1-on-1 time with students

At the heart of youth ministry is the individual student. Even with large crowd programs and events we must continually pursue the one. You can argue whether the church growth movement has created a greater desire for the crowd than the individual, but good youth ministry seeks both. Speak to the crowds; care for the individual.

Bible-based curriculum and teaching

Styles will come and go, sizes of groups will change, and formats will fade, but one thing is going to be at the center no matter what philosophy you're implementing: The Bible has been and must be at the center of youth ministry.

A devoted follower of Jesus leading the group

You would think this one is a no-brainer, but it is surprisingly easy to allow Jesus, and a personal passion for him, to take a back seat. You can talk about leadership, experiment with the latest and greatest

gadgets, tools, and core values, and even have a great youth ministry blog, but if you're not in love with Jesus and devoted to him, it will eventually implode.

Jesus is the focus of youth ministry and why we serve in this role. In all our talk about philosophies and people and practices, we must never forget that!