

# THRIVING YOUTH GROUPS

*secrets for growing your ministry  
& creating a friendship culture*



BY JEANNE MAYO

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# **thriving youth groups** Secrets for growing your ministry

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## DEDICATION

This book is lovingly dedicated to those who have proven to be the epicenter of my life...

To my husband, Sam, who redefines love and constancy in my life and remains my most adored hero and companion. You truly are “the wind beneath my wings.”

To my eldest son, Josh, who has lived with more character and courage than any mom deserves to witness. I.L.Y.W.A.M.H.M.W.A.B.T.C.

To my “second but never last” son, Justin, who has magically merged the worlds of radical in-your-face living with radical in-your-face Christianity. Thanks for all the late-night movies and talks by the lake.

To Jordan, Lesly, Dan, Karena, Jason, Julie, Alex, Kristen, Joni, Michelle, and Carissa, who have dared to believe in the dream of Youth Leader’s Coach and have consistently made such selfless investments of their brilliance and energy.

To Ken, Kathy, and Barbara, who remain treasured friends whose prayers and sacrifices made this whole ministry dream of mentoring youth pastors possible.

To the youth ministry dream teams I’ve loved from Rockford, Bellevue, and Sacramento, who always gave me the “why behind the what.”

To the emerging team in Atlanta (especially Darren, Jordan, and Matt), who remind me daily why youth ministry has captured the essence of my lifelong passion, heart, and mission.

And to the thousands of breathtaking youth leaders and teenagers along the journey, who have allowed me the priceless honor of being “Jesus with skin on” in their lives.

Together we celebrate the reality of our relentless Savior who sends us out to pursue today’s youth culture with his relentless love.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Friends in your life are like pillars on your porch: Sometimes they hold you up; sometimes they lean on you; sometimes it's just enough to know they're standing by.

I'd like to express my most sincere thanks to a few of the individuals who have been such great friends and "pillars" to me through the process of writing this book.

To my treasured "pillar," Lesley Butcher, whose brilliance was only outshined by her tenacious love and loyalty. I am unworthy of your talent, your heart, and your untold hours of diligence. Lesley, Jesus and I are both clapping very loudly for you.

To my new "pillar," Kelli Trujillo, whose role as my editor and cheerleader broke all my previous stereotypes and created an exciting new mental paradigm for book editors. Thank you for always making me feel so deeply heard.

To two of youth ministry's most historic "pillars," Thom and Joani Schultz, the founder and owners of Group Publishing, who dared to take a chance on a youth ministry veteran they had never even met named Jeanne.

And to one final "pillar" named Rick Lawrence, whose encouragement during a chance meeting on our way to Newfoundland rewrote personal history for me. Your integrity and trustworthiness make your words very loud in my life, Rick. Thank you for saying that day, "Jeanne, you have youth ministry years inside of you that need to be chronicled." Late that night when you slipped back to your seat on the airplane, Jesus and I had a long talk. Thank you, my friend. I was listening.

## INTRODUCTION

Vince Lombardi once said that “any man’s finest hour...is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle—victorious.” So as I write these words to you, I find myself looking for a field to fall down in. At last, *Thriving Youth Groups: Secrets for Growing Your Ministry* is completed. It is my privilege to address you personally in these opening pages. And then I will write a mental, “It is finished” over this long-awaited project.

How do I end (and begin) something that is such an integral part of my DNA? I want to begin by saying a sincere thank you for picking up this book. But at the risk of sounding cheesy, allow me to share my heart with you. After nearly thirty-five years in full-time youth ministry, I know how agonizing and lonely the journey can become. I’ve met face to face with literally thousands of amazing youth leaders through the years, many marked by a sense of failure and futility. The most commonly asked question through my journey has been, “What did you do to make this youth group grow so much and still radiate spiritual vitality?”

*Thriving Youth Groups: Secrets for Growing Your Ministry* contains the key principles from my youth ministry journey. Most of these growth concepts center around creating a friendship culture where teenagers feel an authentic sense of affirmation and belonging. In each chapter, I’ve tried to show you the strategic steps we have taken, time after time, to create an atmosphere of Christ-honoring love where students want not only to come back, but also to bring their friends. I’ve also included some thoughts and ideas that have been shared with me by youth leaders around the country; I hope their practical insights are helpful to you as you work to make your ministry thrive.

I’m a pragmatic individual at heart. So while I’ve attempted to tell you key stories that have punctuated my journey, I’ve remained heavy on the

“how to’s.” Like you, I know the discouragement of giving youth ministry your best and still dealing with low attendance, cliques, and utter lack of interest among the students. Throughout the book, I’ve tried to systematically demystify the whole process of creating a welcoming, growing youth ministry.

It’s really no surprise to most of us who have been in youth ministry for a while: The number one thing teenagers want in a youth ministry is a relational, welcoming environment. But how do you create and sustain that kind of atmosphere in the self-centered, insecure youth culture we now minister to? That’s what I’ve tried to chronicle in the following chapters.

So go grab a cup of your favorite java, find a comfortable chair, and let’s begin to travel the “youth ministry trail” together. I’ve made so many mistakes that hopefully my vulnerability will save you a few mishaps of your own. You see, you as a youth leader are really the “big deal” of my spiritual journey now. Though I am continuing in local youth ministry just like you, my primary life mission now is “to encourage, equip, inspire, and instruct the youth leaders of this generation.”

Thank you for allowing me to be somewhat of a “big sis” in the youth ministry trenches. I’ve never known anyone who made it to the Olympics without a coach, and so I pray that this book will allow me to be a long-distance coach and mentor to you, even if we never get to meet this side of heaven.

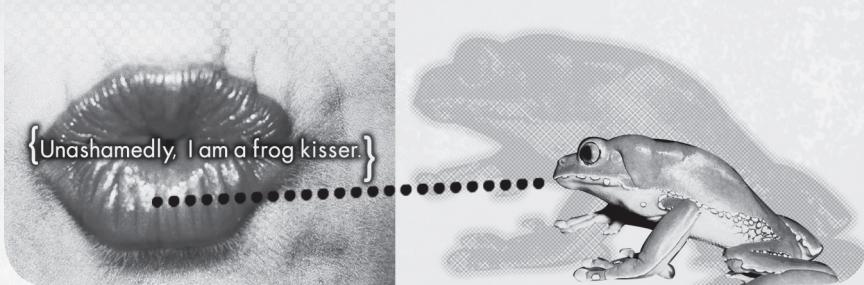
Let me close by sharing the words that have often inspired me to go the long haul in youth ministry, no matter how costly or demanding the journey. They are the words of the historic missionary Jim Elliot: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” That’s a pretty great anthem for those of us in youth ministry; don’t you think?

Lovingly Honored to Be in Your Life,

*Jeanne*

P.S. I checked in with Jesus this morning. He wanted me to remind you that he’s grateful for all your sacrifices in youth ministry, and he’s pretty crazy about you...for real.

## CHAPTER 1



### WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF FROG KISSING

*"People have a way of becoming what you encourage them to be."*—John Mason

I have a confession to make. Unashamedly, I am a frog kisser. Yes, you heard it right. I, Jeanne Mayo, am (and have been for several decades) a proud card-carrying member of Youth Ministry Frog Kissers of America. As a matter of fact, my frog kissing obsession has probably been the key to my significance in youth ministry. Don't worry; I'll explain. It was an unforgettable youth night several years ago that launched me into this preoccupation with frog kissing. Allow me to relive it with you.

We had worked intensely to create an incredible youth night—trust me; it was destined to be a success. We built the entire evening around a relevant theme. We used various creative communication techniques, and we'd packed the place with hundreds of excited, screaming teenagers. Most importantly, we had prayed our guts out that the evening would make Jesus smile. When I gave the students an opportunity to respond to Christ at the conclusion of the service, the reaction was staggering. It was no Billy Graham service, but enough to be remembered as an unforgettable night in my mind.

Then it happened—without warning, the picture-perfect youth night came to a screeching halt. As I slipped to the back of our meeting room to

give high fives to a couple of our key leaders who had worked especially hard, I overheard a conversation that served as a painful wake-up call. Apparently, a parent was picking up her teenager at the conclusion of the service. I heard the mom casually ask her son, “What’d you think?” The teenager took less than a second to formulate his direct four-word reply: “I’m not coming back!”

I picked my heart up off the floor, and I took off after the teenage guy before he could walk out the door. “Look, my name is Jeanne,” I said, trying to get his attention. “I did some of the talking up front tonight. What’s your name?”

In a direct voice, the high school guy spouted off his first name and then turned to walk away. (We’ll call him “Ben” to protect the innocent.) I was not willing to be ditched so easily, so I followed him closer to the door.

“Look, Ben,” I said, feeling slightly embarrassed. “I was standing in the back of the room a few minutes ago and overheard your comments to your mom. I heard you tell her you weren’t coming back.” His eyes

flashed defensively for a second as if he were gearing up for a debate. But I continued. “Would you help us out by telling me where we bombed tonight? I mean, a sharp guy like you would be a huge asset around here. Please tell me what’d we do wrong?”

Ben’s eyes softened a little, and he paused for a second before answering. “It wasn’t what people *did* that was the turnoff. It was what they *didn’t do*.”

“OK, now you’ve really got me curious. What did we *not* do?” I asked. It was becoming obvious to me that Ben wasn’t a socially needy kid. He came across like a sharp, put-together high school guy, but whatever had occurred that night in our youth meeting had obviously created a stinkingly negative impression.

## **GOD MAKES IT GOOD!**

“I had some local high school students who started coming around because I asked them to play basketball with me. From there I asked them to visit our student ministry on Wednesday night. They showed up and have hardly missed a service since. Recently I discovered that some of them have been kicked out of school, been rejected by their parents, or have been in and out of juvenile hall. I talked to them about receiving Jesus Christ, and one responded, ‘God doesn’t want me—I am wasted goods.’ I was able to tell them that God takes what we think is wasted and makes it good. That’s what frog kissing is all about!”

—Todd Bishop, a youth pastor in Valley Stream, New York

**“Our service or program may be great, but if teenagers don’t feel friendliness or acceptance by their peers, they’re not coming back.”**

“I’ll tell you what you *didn’t* do. My mom conned me into coming, and nobody acted like they gave a rip if I was here. *Nobody* talked to me, like I was invisible or something. I’d rather spend my time with people who at least *pretend* like they’re glad I showed up. That’s why I won’t be coming back anymore.”

I attempted to do damage control with Ben as he headed out the door, but his body language made it clear that he was through talking. As the glass door to the youth room shut abruptly behind him, I became painfully aware that our unfriendliness had probably closed some doors in his heart, doors that needed to be open before there could be an authentic faith commitment. We had blown it. Amidst our great music, inspiring message, and great drama that night, we had failed to focus on the one thing that matters most in today’s youth culture: an atmosphere of authentic friendship.

Ben’s abrupt answer sliced through my youth ministry euphoria that night like a knife. But as cutting as his reply was, I’ve discovered it should not have been surprising. An article published in Group Magazine revealed the results of their “Cool Church” survey, which involved approximately 10,000 Christian teenagers. In the survey, teenagers were asked to rate 10 different factors that influence their commitment to church on a sliding scale from “not at all important” to “very important.” The highest ratings in the “very important” category were the following:

#1—A welcoming atmosphere where you can be yourself—73 percent.

#2—Quality relationships with other teenagers—70 percent.

Interestingly enough, the response that came in dead last at 21 percent was:

#10—A fast-paced, high-tech, entertaining ministry approach.

I remember walking back into the youth area that night feeling like a failure. What I thought had been a ministry “home run” suddenly appeared more like a “strikeout” in the eyes of some of our attendees. So what’s the bottom line? Our *service or program* may be great, but if teenagers don’t feel

friendliness or acceptance by their peers, they're not coming back. Youth leader Steve Miller, in the Group Magazine article "The Secrets of Welcoming Youth Groups," warns: "If your group fails the friendliness test, visitors will never return." He encourages all of his student leaders to assume that all newcomers visiting their ministry "are making a last-ditch effort to find someone who cares about them before they end it all."

So what does all of this have to do with frog kissing? Everything. You see, I've been in full-time youth ministry (full-time frog kissing) for three and a half decades. I laughingly tell my audiences at leadership conferences that I've been in youth ministry so long that I can remember when the Dead Sea was still sick! But before you rule me out because I'm too dated to still have a relevant voice in 21st century youth ministry, let me give you a brief overview of my journey. I directed a youth ministry in Nebraska that grew from zero to 350 students who were meeting on a weekly basis. Then I went to Illinois where we saw growth from 35 students to approximately 1,000 each week. Years later in my career, the Lord allowed me to "suffer for his sake" in sunny California. People told me when we first arrived that "Youth ministry will be harder on the West Coast. Teenagers aren't the same there." But after approximately one year in Sacramento, the weekly participation grew from about 80 students to well over 500.

As I write this book, the same kind of exciting turnaround is happening in Atlanta where we've renamed the youth outreach "Oxygen." Why do I tell you all of that? No, I'm not trying to convince you that youth ministry significance is all about numbers—it isn't. But without apology, I must say that I am convinced Christ didn't give his life on a cross so that we could minister to empty chairs. We can't spiritually impact students who are never around us. You don't need to have graduate degrees in theology to recognize that making a difference in God's kingdom requires us to go after people.

## **WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE IN YOUTH MINISTRY GROWTH.**

Through my exciting years in youth ministry, many sincere youth leaders have come to visit our various youth ministries. And all of these extraordinary people had one bottom-line question: "How did the growth occur? Jeanne, what's the secret?" They usually expect me to give them



some magic formula we've implemented in our programming or in our leadership structure. Other well-meaning people quietly drop their voices and ask, "Jeanne, how many hours do you pray each day?" But through the years, my consistent answer has been both surprising and a little disappointing for many of them. I tell them that we're into frog kissing, and because of that, one of our key goals is to become one of the friendliest places in the city. Have we made it yet? Not hardly. But every Wednesday evening when teenagers walk into the door, we ask God to help us make Christ-honoring friendliness the point of our spear. It's the principle of the old theme song from the sitcom *Cheers*. I'm convinced that the writer must have been in youth ministry because the truth is we all do want to be where everybody knows our name.

## **REMEMBER THE OLD FAIRY TALE.**

Getting back to my opening confession: I, Jeanne Mayo, am a charter member of Youth Ministry Frog Kissers of America, and this book is my unashamed attempt to recruit you to join up as well. This all stems from a fairy tale you probably heard as a child. The impact of its message has become my mantra over the past 35 years in youth ministry.

Once upon a time, there was a handsome prince who lived far, far away. He was so handsome that all the fair maidens of the village fell madly in love with him—even the old ugly witch. One day, the witch could no longer contain herself, and she began to hit on the handsome prince. But as you might expect, the fairy tale prince wasn't too impressed. He grew so irritated with her repeated advances that he shunned her in no uncertain terms. And can you blame him? Imagine being hit on by a witch.

The ugly old witch at first was devastated. Then she became angry...very angry. "No handsome prince is going to get away with this!" she said to herself. "I'll show that young punk a thing or two. I'll cast an evil spell on him, and from this day forward, he'll no longer be a handsome prince. Oh, no, from this day forward, he'll be an ugly little frog!"

The wicked witch laughed to herself as she finished concocting the evil spell by adding one final clause—the spell could never, ever be broken...unless the ugly little frog was *kissed by a beautiful*

*princess!* Impossible odds, wouldn't you say? Even the homely guys in your youth group would have had a better chance of getting a beautiful princess to kiss them than an ugly little frog.

And with her declaration, the evil witch waves her wand and with a "Wish! Bam! Boom!" she casts the agonizing spell on our beloved prince. Not realizing what's going on, he finds himself transformed into the body of an ugly, slime-covered, warty little frog. Alone and ashamed, he spends countless hours, day after day, trapped inside this cruel masquerade. He sits on a lily pad crying out, "I'm not an ugly frog. I'm really a handsome prince. Can't anyone see past my ugly warts on the outside to see who I really am? How am I ever going to get a beautiful princess to break this spell by kissing me?"

Years passed because, after all, beautiful princesses just don't kiss ugly frogs. But one day the impossible happened. A beautiful princess came walking by the pond where the little frog had settled. He could smell her perfume in the distance, and he knew that it would be his only chance at recapturing his true destiny. As the princess drew closer, he began to utter his most seductive "Croak... croak." Strangely enough, she felt drawn to the little wart-covered frog. As she stood gazing over him in the pond, he looked up and mustered one final provocative "Croak!"

Then it happened. Emotion overtook the beautiful princess, and in a weak moment, she picked up the pitiful looking frog, looked him squarely in the eyes, and planted a royal kiss right on top of his warts! The little frog began to shake uncontrollably, and with a "Wish! Bam! Boom!" the demoralizing spell was forever broken. The kiss of the beautiful princess, who was able to look past his ugly warts, restored him to his one true destiny—that of a handsome prince.

What's that got to do with creating a welcoming, friendly youth ministry? *Everything.* You see, today's youth culture is filled with "handsome princes" who have had a million different things cast a spell on them. When they

**“You choose to look past the warty junk on the outside and discover the incredible things that are always—**always**—somewhere hidden on the inside.”**

come to your youth ministry, most of them look pretty “froggy.” They show warts of apathy, cynicism, and rebellion that many times turn away even the most seasoned youth leaders. But I hope as you read this book you’ll realize that in order to create a friendly, welcoming youth ministry, you’re going to have to train yourself to look past their froggish warts and see the royalty that Christ has put inside each one of them. What’s the kiss? The magical transformation in your teenagers will come after you, your adult leaders, or your students, in the name of Christ’s love, offer them the kiss of encouragement. You choose to look past the warty junk on the outside and discover the incredible things that are always—*always*—somewhere hidden on the inside.

Sound too childish or irrelevant? The greatest “youth minister” in the world, Jesus Christ himself, was a proud frog kisser. Remember when he was attempting to lead his 12 man leadership team, the disciples? There was a “warty one” named Simon. Simon had a lot of potential, and Jesus knew it. He was great in front of people and always a crowd favorite, but apparently Simon had some of the same issues your potential leaders may have. He was always opening his mouth and sticking his foot in it. He made all sorts of promises that he never followed through on, and one night he got so violent he cut a guy’s ear off. That probably would have been excusable, considering the circumstances; but when Christ needed his disciples most, Simon denied that he *even knew Jesus*. The New Testament account from Luke 22 tells us that he wimped out, cursed, and denied he had anything to do with the Messiah. Stop and take a moment to tell yourself, “Hey, at least my leaders haven’t cut off any ears or denied they know me. I’m not doing so bad.”

## GO WHERE THEY ARE

“One thing we have learned in the inner city is teenagers don’t just want to hear how much you care. They want to see how much you care. We are so much more effective when we go down to their neighborhoods. When we stopped expecting it to be their job to come see us and got into their neck of the woods, our chances of reaching them grew much bigger. They’re looking for someone who won’t give up on them—who is willing to believe in them and go the extra mile to know you are not just talk—you actually care.”

—Stella VanGerwen, youth pastor in urban Los Angeles, California

## **WHAT WAS CHRIST'S RESPONSE TO SIMON THE FROG.**

Christ's response to Simon's froggish conduct was something a little unexpected. Jesus *changed his name*. He believed in Peter. In Matthew 16 Jesus announced to Simon that his name was now going to be Peter, which means *rock*. Peter was no longer an average little pebble—Jesus called him to be a big boulder. Jesus was sending Simon Peter a life-changing signal that day by saying, “Take heart, Pete. I’m looking past the froggish impression of your little pebble nature. I’m not going to write you off simply because of what I see on the outside. I see you as the big boulder that my Father has made you to be. You have a future, a purpose, and a destiny, Peter. I’m choosing to believe in you consistently and authentically, and I know we’re going to uncover it.”

Did Peter change instantly and quit being froggy? No...and neither will your teenagers change immediately. It’s a process.

Maybe you’ve picked up this book because you want to change the friendliness quotient in your youth ministry? Maybe you want it to become a place where guests visit and want to return? Maybe you want to see cliques and social barriers broken among your teenagers? Maybe you’re reading because you just want to see your group grow? Before you jump to the next chapter, prayerfully ask the Lord to enroll you in Frog Kissing 101.

Remember Ben, the guy who gave me my brutal wake-up call? I know that soon all the Bens in your life will be forever grateful that you took the time to read this book—and more importantly, applied it. If you want to lower the “I’m not coming back” factor, remember that we teach what we know, but we reproduce who we are. Your youth ministry will never be more genuinely friendly than you are. It’s time to zero in on a couple of “croaking teenagers” and start kissing frogs!

**“We teach what we know,  
but we reproduce who we are.”**



## Now What? Ideas

Use these ideas to put the principles in this chapter into action:

- Study some of Jesus' frog kissing and the impact his love and kindness had on the lives of people like Peter (Matthew 16:13-19 and Acts 2:14-41), Paul (Acts 8:1; 9:1-31), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), Thomas (John 20:24-31), and the thief on the cross (Luke 23:36-43).
- Find a picture of yourself as a young teenager. Remember the awkwardness and insecurity of adolescence. What were your warts? How did you feel froggish? Put the picture in your wallet or purse as a reminder to see the real person behind a teenager's froggish behavior.
- Pick an upcoming evening, and ask a couple of your more perceptive students to experience your youth service through the eyes of a newcomer. Have them report back to you on their findings.
- Take some time to reflect on at least one person who saw past your "warts" and helped you become who you are today through their frog kissing in your life. Think about the simple but effective things this person did to give you "the kiss of encouragement."
- Make a list of students whom you personally helped to become a "prince" or "princess" in the last year through your authentic friendliness and belief in them.
- Make a list of some current students you are targeting, who are still "pretty warty."
- On a scale of 1 to 10, rate yourself on how well you are doing in the area of intentional friendship and warmth.

# SECRETS FOR GROWING YOUR MINISTRY REVEALED



Filled with practical ministry-booster ideas that help youth feel welcomed, valued, and loved!

## BUILD A FRIENDSHIP CULTURE

If a youth group fails the “friendliness test,” teenagers won’t come back. Fortunately, building a friendship culture is easier than you think—especially with this in-depth and practical guide from renowned youth ministry expert Jeanne Mayo. Her four decades of in-the-trenches experience are poured into this idea-filled book to help even the busiest youth workers create a truly magnetic ministry—and a true “youth family.” Jeanne’s field-tested insights encourage both spiritual and numerical growth!

Includes “Now What?” questions to help leaders evaluate their ministries and strategize how to make theirs magnetic!

Gain both spiritual and numerical growth when you focus on real, authentic relationships!



**JEANNE MAYO** has more than four decades of full-time ministry experience and is a popular speaker. She's the head of Youth Leader's Coach ([www.youthleaderscoach.com](http://www.youthleaderscoach.com)) — a ministry that provides training and resources. Her thriving youth ministries have grown from less than 100 to more than 1,000 teenagers. Jeanne is a youth pastor in Atlanta, Georgia.



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