

EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY



A Beautiful Mess

What's Right With Youth Ministry

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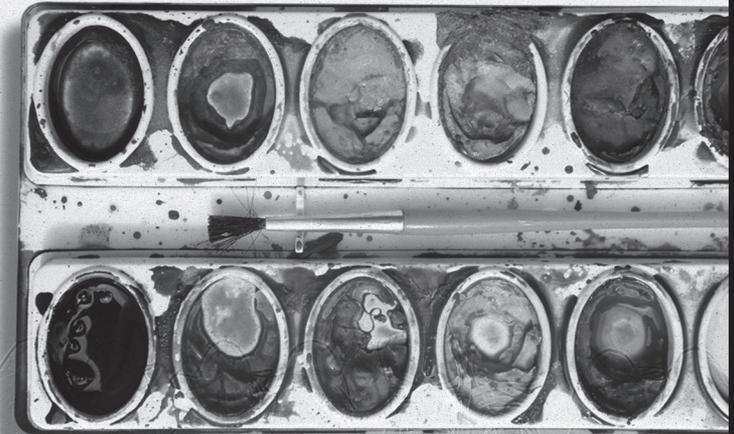
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A BEAUTIFUL MESS

What's Right With Youth Ministry



BY MARK OESTREICHER



AN EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: THE VOICE OF THE IN-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

DEDICATION

For Kurt Johnston, my friend and youth ministry hero, whose incessant (and occasionally annoying) positivity was really the stimulus for this book.

Thanks to Tash McGill, Brian Berry, and KJ for their super-helpful input. Thanks to Andy and Nadim from SYM for catching the vision for this book and coming up with a creative way of getting it out there. Thanks to all the street-level youth workers who have shared their stories and lives with me over the past couple of years.

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CHAPTER 1:

**BUT ISN'T THE
YOUTH MINISTRY
SKY FALLING?**

I'm a pot-stirrer.

I have carved out a little niche in the youth ministry world by being a contrarian. I have spoken, written, taught, preached, and conversed until I'm blue in the face about our need for change in youth ministry. There's been a "youth ministry must change or die" vibe to my blog for years.

And in recent years, all kinds of amazing research has come out to support my "windbaggedness."

- Christian Smith's research in the National Study on Youth and Religion created a tipping point into angst for thousands of youth workers; his identification of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as the primary faith of American teenagers (Christian or not) rocked us. Kenda Dean's brilliant follow-up to this study, *Almost Christian*, framed the bleak issues with a sole focus on Christianity.
- An oft-quoted Southern Baptist survey (among others) showed teenagers leaving the church and their faith at a rate of up to 80 percent (other surveys, by other groups, revealed tempered—but still startling—results).

- Chap Clark told us that teenagers are deeply *Hurt*, and we all knew—even if we didn’t verbalize it—that our rah-rah youth group approaches weren’t addressing that pain and isolation.
- The Fuller Youth Institute’s *Sticky Faith* research was more upbeat, as it provided proactive steps. But the unspoken implication was clear: What we’ve been doing does *not* promote a faith that lasts.
- Even my own book, *Youth Ministry 3.0*, made the case that most of us are framing our youth ministry thinking and approaches around a culturally outdated priority of need for autonomy, when the dominant need of today’s teenager is belonging.

As I crisscross the country speaking to and with youth workers, and as I interact with them via phone and email and Facebook® and blog comments, I have heard a growing sense of depression. Sure, there are arrogant youth workers who are convinced they’re doing well because they “have the numbers to prove it.” But the average youth worker these days—at least

among those who read youth ministry books and articles and blogs—seems to have a looming sense of malaise: “I still love teenagers and feel called to them, but everything I read tells me I’m failing.”

That’s a difficult place to minister out of, that feeling of missing the mark.

Despite chipper reminders from optimists like Kurt Johnston (of Saddleback Church and Simply Youth Ministry), pleading with us that “the youth ministry sky *is not falling*,” there’s a black cloud overhead for many youth workers.

This book is not a 180. I’m not going to stop pushing for change. I will continue to rant and write manifestos.

But I’ve also experienced a bit of a perspective shift. During my decade at Youth Specialties, I certainly had contact with a multitude of youth workers. However, I can see in hindsight that my role put me in a bit of a silo (or some other metaphor that would be the ministry organization equivalent of an academic ivory tower). In the past two and a half years, as I’ve struck out on my own, I’ve had so many more long

conversations with in-the-trenches youth workers. I'm overstating this, but I feel—in some ways—that I've become reacquainted with real youth pastors.

This move from the executive suite to the street has brought me face-to-face, over and over again, with the daily contrasting realities of pain and hope that real youth workers live with. And I've been reminded of the good stuff. I mean, I never left youth ministry (I've been a volunteer small group leader at my church for years), so I knew the good stuff of calling and great conversations with teenagers and the joy of doing youth ministry with other servants. But I was a bit too focused on the part of the glass that's empty, the black-cloud stuff.

So, no, this book isn't a refuting of what I've ranted about before or what I will, surely, say in the future. Instead, this is my small attempt to describe the goofy, awkward, messy beauty in the full part of the glass (whatever percentage it is).

There's a subtle arrogance (and I've definitely fallen prey to this) in thinking that we've blown it. That might sound strange, because an honest acknowledgement

of where we truly have missed the mark requires a massive dose of humility. But often embedded in much of the conversation about how to “fix” youth ministry (I'm calling myself out here) is the unspoken idea that I am capable and that you are capable of transforming the lives of teenagers. The thinking is: If teenagers don't embrace a robust faith, and it was because I wasn't *doing youth ministry right*, then if I change things up, I can *cause* them to be more Christian.

Along the way, we've often misplaced the gorgeous value of patience.

The mundane way of steadfastness.

The unflashy path of consistency.

We forget what we've taught our teenagers over and over again, that God often uses the most improbable and unskilled to do his most amazing work.

The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well (John 4:4-26) understood almost nothing about who Jesus really was or the *living water* he offered her. She was a Samaritan (despised by Jews), and a