The background of the book cover is a dark gray field filled with a repeating pattern of small, light gray silhouettes of people in various poses. In the center, there are two larger, semi-transparent silhouettes of a man and a woman facing each other, appearing to be in conversation. The title is printed in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters over the central silhouettes.

THE INDISPENSABLE YOUTH PASTOR

LAND, LOVE, AND LOCK IN YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY DREAM JOB

MARK DEVRIES & JEFF DUNN-RANKIN

The Indispensable Youth Pastor

Land, Love, and Lock In Your Youth Ministry Dream Job

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ISBN 978-0-7644-6610-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed in the United States of America.

*"I admire the work of Mark DeVries and Jeff Dunn-Rankin as much as any one in youth ministry today. They understand not only what makes up effective student ministry, but they also have a death-grip on what a really effective youth worker looks like. If you are a youth worker, **The Indispensable Youth Pastor**, is worth it's weight in gold. It is a guide that will move you into a successful future as a youth worker and help you in your next youth ministry position. Chapter 5 alone is worth the price of the book. Buy it...read it...apply it and get about becoming the difference maker you were born to be."*

—Dan Webster

Founder—Authentic Leadership, Inc.

*"Mark DeVries and Jeff Dunn-Rankin are the most profoundly sensible people to ever write about youth ministry—profound in exuding effortless wisdom in every chapter, sensible in making you wonder how we ever lived without this book. **The Indispensable Youth Pastor** dares to believe that youth ministry can be a lifelong, spiritually invigorating vocation for youth pastors and congregations alike. For all of us who dare to think that God might be calling us into ministry with young people: The sooner we read this book, the better."*

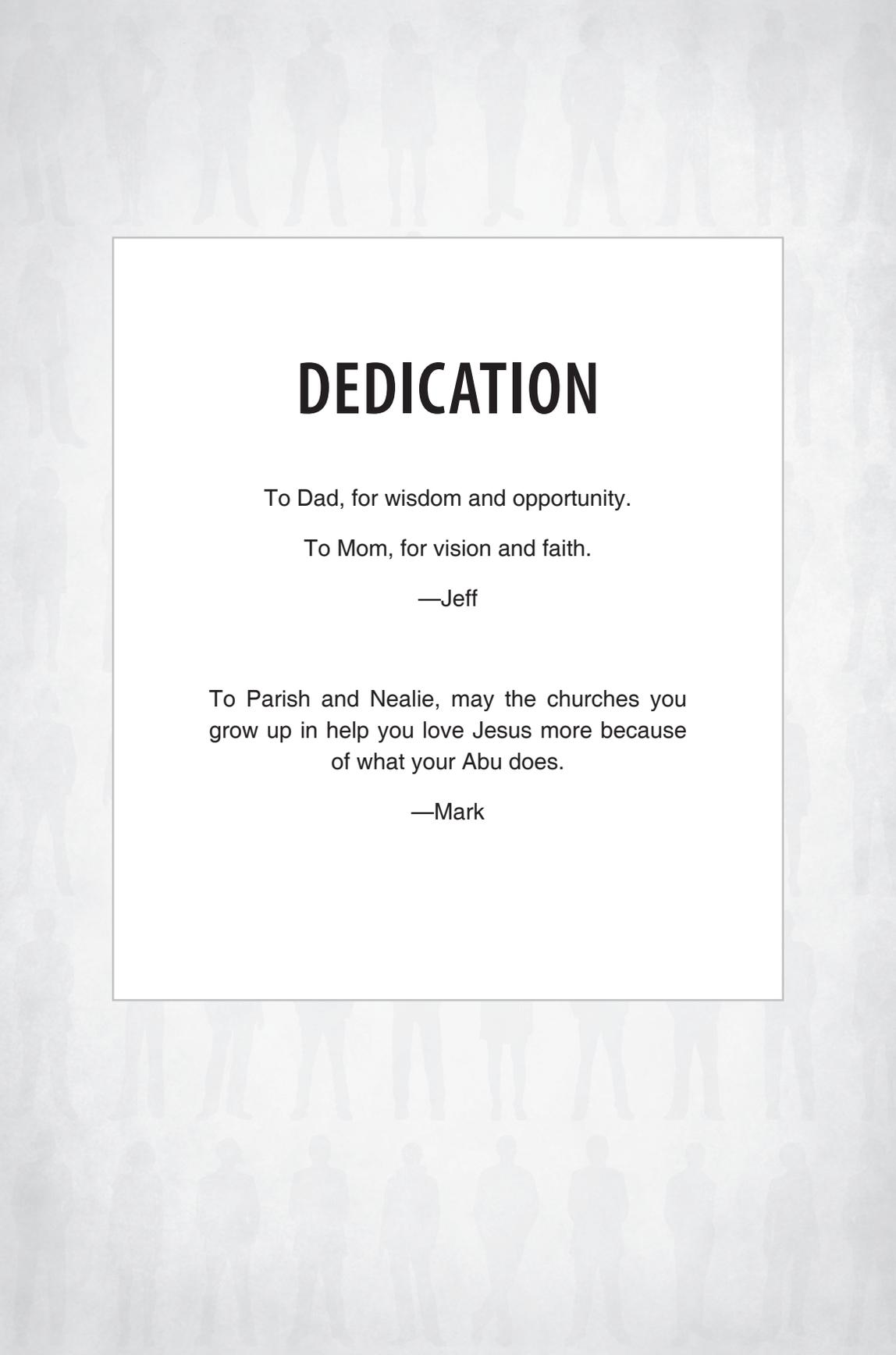
—Kenda Creasy Dean

Professor of Youth, Church and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary
Author, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford 2010)

"Do you love the Lord, youth, and the Church? Then you have all that is needed to be a winning youth pastor—right? Not according to the authors of this book and they clearly spell out why. If you desire to be a sustainable, spiritual leader of youth, you must read this dynamic, to-the-point, practical, and insightful book that covers everything from preparing yourself, landing your job, becoming indispensable, and loving the position you have. Filled with principles and true-life illustrations from those with years of experience in youth work, this book contains the tools prospective youth leaders need to avoid the pitfalls that derail so many youth ministers. This is a book I plan to require in my youth ministry classes."

—Dr. Brian Richardson

The Basil Manly, Jr. Professor of Youth Ministry
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, KY

The background of the page is a light gray color with a repeating pattern of faint, stylized human silhouettes in various poses, creating a subtle crowd effect.

DEDICATION

To Dad, for wisdom and opportunity.

To Mom, for vision and faith.

—Jeff

To Parish and Nealie, may the churches you
grow up in help you love Jesus more because
of what your Abu does.

—Mark

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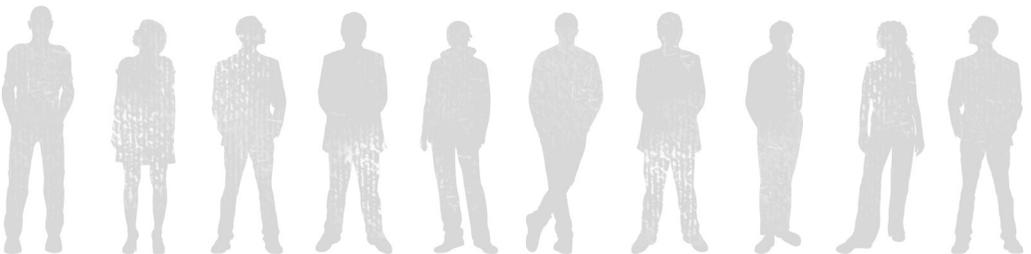
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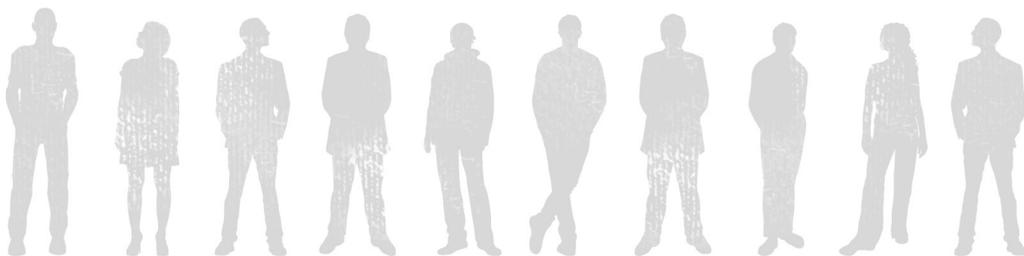
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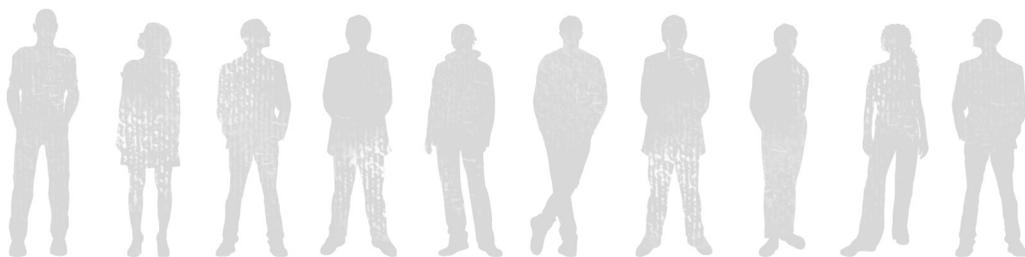
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THEY CALL IT WORK FOR A REASON

INTRODUCTION

A year or so ago, I had the privilege of doing a phone interview with a group of youth ministry majors in Duffy Robbins' senior seminar at Eastern University. In characteristic Duffy style, he started the interview tongue in cheek and asked:

"Uh...Mark...My class liked your book and everything. But after reading *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, a number of my youth ministry majors are beginning to wonder if God's will for their lives might have changed. How do you feel about writing a book that makes people less excited about doing youth ministry?"

I laughed and said, "I'm actually thrilled!"

"Sorry?"

I answered, giving this class the very same message I knew they had heard in every youth ministry class they had taken at Eastern:

"In my work as a consultant, I get to see way too many fried youth workers. These are folks who were expecting their jobs to be a whole lot like being camp counselors. Then they find themselves overwhelmed, facing a dizzying combination of expectations they are totally unprepared for.

“Sadly, I get to see people on the other side—people who entered the world of youth ministry bright-eyed and passionate but leave prematurely, burned out and skulking away from ministry and often from the church altogether.

“The real tragedy,” I explained, “is that *it doesn’t have to be this way*.”

“The time to decide about a ‘call’ to youth ministry is not *after* you get hired by a church, fall in love with a group of kids, and find the pieces of the ministry falling apart all around you. The time to make that decision is now.

“So, I’m *thrilled*—thrilled for this group of soon-to-be youth workers to have their eyes wide-open to what they are stepping into.”

I imagine the students on the other end of the conference call with hands in the air, joking with their professor, “*Now* you tell me! Thanks a lot!”

LANDING, LOVING, AND LOCKING IN

For almost a decade now, we’ve been privileged to work with hundreds of youth workers, helping them find the right fit, build sustainable youth ministries, and set up systems that allow them to love their work more with each passing year. And through lots of encounters with people just like you, we’ve stumbled onto a few principles that have the power to transform the way you approach your next (or your current) call in youth ministry.

Here’s what we’ve observed: There are people who can *land* a youth ministry job but soon find themselves detesting the job they’ve gotten. There are others who have everything it takes to build a sustainable youth ministry but just can’t seem to get their foot in the door. And there are still others who love their ministries but work with the any-day-now threat of losing their jobs for reasons that feel mysterious and unknowable.

The dance of having a vocation in youth ministry requires all three skills: landing, loving, and locking in your dream youth ministry job. And this book is written to equip you for all three.



Because of our short attention spans (and yours), we've divided this book into short chapters. The stories we tell are true, although we often change the names, locations, and details to protect the innocent and guilty alike. And every now and then we've taken the liberty of creating parables to illustrate a principle or two.

Jeff and I have had the privilege of working side by side for many of the last 25 years. And most recently, we've been honored to lead the Youth Ministry Architects team together. Both of us still serve on staff at our churches, leading their youth ministries. And both of us imagine ourselves working as youth pastors until our families check us into our respective nursing homes.

As you might imagine, when two old friends tell stories about their shared experiences, the details of who did what can get confusing. So for the sake of simplicity, we decided to write this book in one voice. Here's how that will play out in the pages you're about to read:

When we speak of "we," we're talking about Jeff and me.

When you read "I" or "me" in a personal anecdote (like the Duffy story or the sentence above), it's Mark talking. Though the stories may be in my voice, these are our stories, not just mine.

When you see the name Jeff at any point in the book, it's not a random youth worker named Jeff; it is my co-author, Jeff Dunn-Rankin.

Ready?

A friend of ours once told us, "When you are prepared to do whatever it takes, you almost never have to do whatever it takes." He was talking about building a healthy marriage, but the same can be said for those who want to build a thriving youth ministry.

One of the most fascinating paradoxes of youth ministry is this: Those who are prepared for how hard youth ministry is, often and mysteriously, are those who discover it's not that hard after all.

In many ways, our little book here is simply a footnote to Jesus' words:

“BUT DON’T BEGIN UNTIL YOU COUNT THE COST. FOR WHO WOULD BEGIN CONSTRUCTION OF A BUILDING WITHOUT FIRST CALCULATING THE COST TO SEE IF THERE IS ENOUGH MONEY TO FINISH IT?” (LUKE 14:28).

Every youth ministry is costly—exhausting, overwhelming, captivating, tedious, energizing, demanding, draining, and, at times, severely stressful. To enter into this vocation without eyes wide-open to those challenges virtually guarantees being blindsided and overwhelmed by the very situations that a well-prepared youth worker will handle with ease.

In his book *Youth Ministry From the Inside Out*, Mike Higgs paints a haunting picture of the littered landscape of youth ministry: “Sadly, the longer you are in youth ministry, the longer the list of sidelined and flatlined comrades becomes. And the obvious question is *why?*”

In the pages that follow, we’ll answer the “why” question; but more importantly, we’ll be answering the “how” question, providing the tools you’ll need to stay in the game of youth ministry for as long as God has called you.

Prepare to be prepared.



HOW TO LAND THE YOUTH MINISTRY JOB YOU'LL LOVE

SECTION ONE

You may have started reading in this section because you are in search of your next, maybe your first, youth ministry position. Maybe you're just a compliant reader, and you're here because it's the next page in the book.

If you are happy in your current role and not even considering a search, you'll probably want to skip most of this section and save it for later. *But before you do...*

Make sure you read Chapters 1-4. These pages apply to everyone in youth ministry and will serve as a foundation for all that we have to say in Sections Two and Three.



FIRST THINGS FIRST

CHAPTER 1

“I AM THE VINE; YOU ARE THE
BRANCHES...APART FROM ME YOU CAN
DO NOTHING” (JOHN 15:5).

Jeff (my co-author) had been a youth ministry volunteer for more than 15 years when God began to nudge him toward full-time ministry at his local church. He resisted mightily, with a long list of reasons why it would just be plain silly for him to leave his job as a newspaper editor.

As he rehearsed his list of excuses to his wife, he came up with a new one: “...and besides, I don’t even read the Bible myself! How can I teach my youth to do what I don’t do?!”

Mary Lou looked at him sweetly and said, “Don’t you think you need to be doing that anyway—whether you become a youth pastor or not?”

Jeff hated the sting. But he knew Mary Lou was right (again).

Jeff responded to Mary Lou’s challenge by starting reading. And it was in his process of reading through Ecclesiastes (of all books!) that he began to wake up to the possibility that God really might be calling him into full-time youth ministry. It was during this season that he landed in his first youth ministry job, at the church he already attended. And more than a decade later, he’s still there.

MINISTRY OUT OF WHO WE ARE

Edwin Friedman in *A Failure of Nerve* said the same thing: “Children rarely succeed in rising above the maturity level of their parent, and this principle applies to all mentoring, healing, or administrative relationships.”¹

We might be able to fake our way through the job interviews, but we just can’t fake our way through a ministry with teenagers for very long.

The only way to *share* a vibrant faith is to *have* a vibrant faith. And as sure as an acorn becomes an oak, we can only reproduce what we are.

In his book *What I Wish My Youth Leader Knew About Youth Ministry*, Mike Nappa reported that among the teenagers he surveyed, the quality they were looking for *most* in a youth leader was someone who was following and loving Jesus Christ themselves. More than a “cool” youth pastor or tech-savvy youth pastor, more than a great teacher or someone who can lead entertaining programs, teenagers reported that they *first* wanted leaders who were actually living out their faith themselves.²

It’s not that there aren’t dry seasons. There’s no single “right” formula for staying anchored in our own faith. The key is to do something to grow in our own faith (even if that “something” is deliberately doing “nothing” in silence before God). Our students don’t need to see perfection. What they do need to see is our purposeful, genuine, even stumbling pursuit of God for ourselves.

Of course, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we pursue God for God’s own sake. But when we pursue God intentionally, it will undeniably impact our ministries and our search for the right ministry in three specific ways:

Call and discernment. The search for a position in youth ministry is no normal job search. Nowhere does the literal meaning of the word “vocation” hold more true than in the vocation of ministry. The word vocation, of course, shares the same root as the word “voice.” And time for listening to God will be key to hearing the voice of our peculiar calling.



Bread for the long journey. Whether you're searching for a youth ministry position or have landed one, you'll need to stay healthy during the long journey. When no one is responding to your e-mails or when the third church has passed on your résumé, you need something more than a pat on the back and a stiff upper lip. Or when potential volunteers don't respond to your phone calls or when your attempts at starting new programs fall flat (again), being anchored in Christ has a way of keeping you walking when you feel like quitting.

Transparency. Though they may not be able to tell immediately, teenagers can often see through the veil of our own superficial faith—and so can a good search committee. Part of the reason for an on-site interview is to give the church a chance to get a sense of who we are beyond a résumé. Often, when churches describe the people they have hired, we hear hard-to-define phrases like “authentic faith” and “anchored.” Churches are looking for those who not only can “do the work” but also those who exhibit the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace—all the way down to self-control. And fruit only grows when it is cultivated.

When we asked Pastor José to describe his youth director's greatest assets, he said, “I love the way he lives his life, the way he treats his family, and the way he demonstrates faith just by ‘doing life’ in full view of the youth group kids.”

So take the tip from the flight attendant: “Please make sure your own oxygen mask is secure before attempting to help others.”

We just can't share what we just don't have.



IF YOU WANT TO DO YOUTH MINISTRY, WE SUGGEST YOU...

CHAPTER 2

The auditorium was filled with writers—OK, would-be writers.

After four arduous years studying to write, the graduating class was thrilled to hear the wisdom of one of the most successful writers ever to walk the planet.

For reasons known only to him, this famous author had said an unexpected yes to the invitation to speak at commencement. And so, this group of eager young graduates, each dreaming of a career as a writer, sat poised to glean some insider secrets about actually making it in a field where so few actually do.

But what they heard stunned everyone in the crowded hall.

The speaker started out with a fine, if unoriginal, listener-getting device: “How many of you want to be writers?” Almost every graduate raised a hand—some eager and confident, others timid and doubting.

After the hands were lowered, the speaker paused. An uncomfortably long pause.

He began again, “If you hope to be writers, then...I suggest you write.” He gazed into the eyes of his captive audience—and sat down.

We’ve met many young men and women who say they *really, really, really* want to do youth ministry, but they are not actually doing it—some have never done it. They are quick to explain that they just don’t have time or they just can’t find the right church or they are ready to serve but no one has asked them.

But working in an imperfect church, juggling an overloaded schedule, and taking initiative despite what other people do will be part and parcel of any job in youth ministry. If you are not currently serving in a youth ministry, do not pass go, do not perfect your résumé, do not even start applying yet. Find a youth ministry where you can serve first. If you want to land a satisfying job in the world of youth ministry, first learn what it feels like to be a volunteer and work to become the MVP on your church’s volunteer ministry team.

When we see a résumé of someone who is applying for a youth ministry job but who isn’t doing youth ministry, we know what that person wants.

They want a job.

But youth ministry, as a job, is challenging, often overwhelming, and the paycheck is seldom enough to keep us in the game. As a volunteer, you may discover how much you love this work, or you may actually realize this is not a calling you want to pursue. It just makes sense that you make this discovery before you (and the church) go to all the trouble of getting you hired.

Searching churches will look for one quality more than any other: proven results. So if you don’t have any youth ministry results you can point to, get some. Plan a retreat, oversee volunteer recruitment, or make it your goal to increase the involvement of students in your ministry by 10 percent in the next six months. These will be the kinds of results that will catch the attention of searching churches.

If you think God may have a call on your life to serve in youth ministry, by all means, pursue it. But take the time to let your heart burn deeply to see teenagers—real, breathing, sometimes annoying teenagers—walk



more deeply with Christ. Take the time to experience the heartbreak of praying and praying for specific students and seeing no visible fruit.

You and those touched by your future ministry will be grateful that you did. To paraphrase: If you want to do youth ministry, then *do* youth ministry...starting now.



THE MOST IMPORTANT YOUTH MINISTRY SKILL *EVER*

CHAPTER 3

Before we get starting talking about how to *land* your next job in youth ministry, there is someone we'd like you to meet.

This person will, without a doubt, be the most important asset you will *ever* have on a youth ministry team—a committed follower of Jesus, someone who loves kids and has strong gifts for ministry. This is someone with the *exact* gifts you will need not only to get the youth ministry job of your dreams but also to move that ministry from where it is to where you want it to be.

But before we make the introduction, we need to warn you. This person has a problem. Several, actually.

The biggest problem is that this person actually doesn't *know* about the problem. And to make things more personal, this character has the power to cripple *your* future ministry one day.

Though this person *could* become aware of his or her problems and actually do something about them, there remain areas where this person chooses to stay in the dark, steadfastly refusing to grow, clinging to unhelpful habits and behaviors.

Because this one individual has such pivotal power in setting the trajectory of your ministry, you'll want to get a good look.

All it takes is a mirror.

That's right. No one has the power to sabotage your efforts at landing and loving your next youth ministry job like you do. So whether you are searching for a youth ministry job or just hoping to stay satisfied in the one you have, the most important skill you will *ever* need is *self-awareness*.

We go to seminars to master our ministry, manage our marriages, and fix our children, but too often we fail to tend to the only common denominator in every single problem we've ever faced: ourselves. Let us give you an example from the real-life world of youth ministry.

We have a friend in ministry who is extraordinary with teenagers. He loves taking them to the deep places, places where they experience God's heartbeat. But he hates "administration." He says it gets in the way of "real ministry."

The problem is not that he hates administration. Most youth workers we know feel the same way. The problem is that instead of learning to dance with the massive administrative needs of his ministry or adding someone to his team who can manage logistics, he's actually moving backward, in a negative spiral. He's grown comfortable blaming his "apathetic" church, his "controlling" senior pastor, and his "half-hearted" volunteers. As a result, the only significant change in his ministry over the past few years has been the increased decibel level of his complaining.

Maybe your story is different. Maybe your need for perfection leads you to spew anger without knowing the collateral damage it produces. Maybe you have such a need for peace and calm that you avoid dealing with little problems until they become huge ones. Maybe you have such an overwhelming drive to be special that you'll do anything—even sabotage your ministry—to avoid being "ordinary."

Jeremiah was right when he wrote, "*The human heart is the most deceitful of all things*" (*Jeremiah 17:9*). We each have our own unique brand of self-deception.



The search for the youth ministry job of our dreams begins with self-awareness and a ruthless willingness to know our own brokenness. Thriving in youth ministry begins with becoming an expert at knowing the things about us that everyone close to us knows so well. It begins with relentlessly committing to a deliberate process of growing beyond who we are into more and more of what God made us to be.



MORE THAN KID STUFF

CHAPTER 4

Jed loved working with teenagers, and he was great at it.

He'd shoot baskets all afternoon with a couple of boys, followed by great conversations about life, girls, and faith. He could hang out for hours at a high school football game and never grow tired of spending time with teenagers. Wherever students were, that's where he wanted to be. He was a youth-magnet, loved by students and parents alike.

But in his first full-time youth ministry job (actually his first full-time job of any kind), Jed hated all the administrative work he referred to as "trivial." When the pastor reminded him that part of what he was hired to do was to run the ministry, not just to do the ministry, Jed was convinced that he had a senior pastor that just didn't understand the real world of working with teenagers.

We had an inkling that Jed's days as a paid youth director were numbered when he told us, "You know, this is starting to feel like work. And when it becomes work, it stops being ministry."

Sadly, we were right.

He was off the payroll two months later.

Jed had stepped into his position with a common misconception: “When it becomes work, it stops being ministry.”

The truth is, there’s a lot of work attached to ministry.

Ask Moses. Ask Noah. And now, you can ask Jed. He was great at the relational stuff—as long as the students came to him. But when the pastor asked him to be accountable for reaching students who didn’t show up, or for a 12-month calendar, or for a game plan for training volunteers, Jed simply didn’t see those priorities as ministry.

When it was clear that those parts of the job description were simply not going to happen under his leadership, he and the church parted company, leaving dozens of brokenhearted, confused teenagers in his wake.

ANSWER THIS QUESTION FIRST

When Jeff (that co-author of mine you’ve read so much about) was considering moving from being a volunteer to becoming a paid youth director at his church, I asked him a hard question. “Before you apply,” I asked, “which of the following statements describes you better: (1) I want to spend lots of time with teenagers, or (2) I want to manage a ministry that reaches more teenagers than I could reach myself?”

“If you choose No. 1,” I said, “you’ll be happier as an outstanding volunteer at your local church. If you choose No. 2, you’re ready to start your search for a professional youth ministry position.”

Put another way, are you willing to give up some of time you would spend doing youth ministry in order to *lead* a youth ministry?

THE HIDDEN ASPECTS OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Many first-time youth ministers experience an eye-opening surprise: Sustainable, healthy youth ministries are run by people who spend roughly a third of their time with students, a third of their time with adult volunteers and parents, and a third of their time in a hard chair,



reserving vans, updating youth directories, and going to church meetings.

The good news is that when we do ministry this way, we still get to spend lots of time with students. Our friends will still be jealous of this sweet job of ours that actually pays us to hang out with teenagers and have fun. But better still, the team and infrastructures we build will allow our ministries to reach further and deeper than we could ever do alone.

Just because someone is “great with youth” doesn’t mean that person will necessarily be a great youth pastor. There’s simply a lot of behind-the-scenes work and basic management involved in any sustainable youth ministry.

Every new youth pastor is handed a boxful of expectations from a wide variety of constituencies—from the youth to their parents to the church custodian. Passion and giftedness will simply not be enough, in and of themselves, to overcome a lack of basic leadership skills.

Before you say yes to being a “professional” youth worker, be certain you’ve taken a good look at all the hidden work it will take to build a sustainable youth ministry. You owe it to the teenagers you will work with to answer that question *before* you get hired.