



EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY



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Part-Time Youth Ministry, Full-Time Heart

Artfully Balancing Family, Career, and Passion for Ministry

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PART-TIME YOUTH MINISTRY, FULL-TIME HEART

Artfully Balancing Family, Career,
and Passion for Ministry

BY JEREMIAH AND SARAH ISLEY



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

THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

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INTRODUCTION: THE PATH LESS TAKEN

Neither of us had planned on a life in ministry. We did not go to school with a focus on youth ministry—or ministry of any type, for that matter. Yet God has led us along this path, giving us the privilege of ministering to teenagers and their families. But before we tell you some of the things we've learned and experienced in ministry, let us share a little bit about our story. Perhaps some of it will sound similar to your own journey.

Sarah graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, and Jeremiah went to a tech school for audio engineering. We met through a mutual friend at church (much earlier than Sarah actually remembers) and began dating when all of our mutual friends left the country for several weeks on a mission trip with the young adult group from our church.

Jeremiah's career was under way working in recording studios, live theater, and live sound. It was very cool work for an aspiring young musician who fancied himself somewhat of a rock star. He was working with BIG names that came through town and was making great inroads in an industry that, like any other

industry, was a small world, and it wasn't always what you knew but who you knew.

Sarah went to Denver to pursue a graduate program in publishing, dreaming of editing at a big-name publisher in New York. She helped open a bookstore, then moved to a software development/electronic publishing company (before anyone knew what e-books were) and traveled to exciting places for trade shows and training. She then ventured into the IT and management side of the insurance industry. After we started a family, she pursued telecommuting positions as a copy editor, while juggling all of the responsibilities of motherhood (we're hoping our boys have great grammar skills from the hours they snuggled with her as she edited).

We were married in 2002, and shortly after, Sarah started helping out with a "rogue" small group of girls that met at a youth leader's home. It wasn't long until the topic of us becoming volunteers in the youth ministry at our church came up, and we jumped in the deep end. For a few months it was pretty awesome—we were the "cool" volunteers, young, just married, Jeremiah played on the worship team, and the girls absolutely adored Sarah (they always do; she's still

cool like that.) But a theme that became a constant for us in youth ministry was *transition*. Just a few months after coming on board with the youth ministry, our youth pastor very abruptly stepped away. That Wednesday night—when he called all the volunteers into his office to let us know that this night was his last—was a night that changed our lives in big, big ways! After that evening’s service—when the students had left after much confusion, tears, and questioning—we volunteers had another meeting in our then-senior pastor’s office.

In that meeting the senior pastor and a few elders asked how the volunteers wanted to handle the upcoming months, while the church searched for a new youth pastor. With a unanimous voice we all agreed that youth ministry would continue as normally as possible, including the BIG retreat to the beach that was planned in just about a month!

It was on the 12-hour bus ride to the beach that another volunteer, who has a history of speaking prophetic truth into people—we’ll call him Rico—looked at Jeremiah and said, “You’re the next youth pastor.” Well, we both blew off the statement; our careers were doing well, and we had plans. Several

times on that trip those words were spoken to Jeremiah. Rico was a bit of a goofball, but this wasn't goofy Rico—this was his serious face. We spent nearly a week at the beach and had an awesome Spirit-led time with the teenagers. And later that summer a new youth pastor was hired, and it wasn't Jeremiah (we never even considered submitting his résumé).

Fast-forward five years, and the church as a whole was facing a huge season of transition, the “new guy” was going back to his home state to plant a church (yeah!), and the church was forming a search committee to find a new senior pastor after the founding pastor, sadly, passed away. We were also going through a transition ourselves as we both felt God calling Jeremiah into ministry. Jeremiah had started applying at large churches around the country for technical/sound positions. God was stirring ministry into our lives—but we were looking at our comfort zone: tech, media, sound. Back at the church, weeks after the congregation placed the new senior pastor (who was acting senior pastor for nearly two years), Jeremiah's phone rang. And while sitting in a coffee shop, he received the offer to be the new youth director, to lead the youth ministry and shepherd the students, and to explore the urging toward a life in ministry—part time.

We aren't writing this book because we have all of the answers. And certainly the advice we will give is not the advice we have always followed. But we have three years of experience serving in youth ministry on a part-time basis. Jeremiah's career led to a position working full time on the AV staff of a local college campus. Sarah works as a freelance copy editor out of our home, allowing her to stay at home with our two boys. And so we have crammed, squished, and packed youth ministry into our already-full lives, and we feel that by sharing our experiences, trials, victories, and defeats, we may be able to help others who are in similar positions. Whether you're considering taking a part-time role, you've just jumped in, or you've been doing it for some time, this book exists for you.

We have found that even with our careful and prayerful consideration, the youth ministry water was much deeper than we expected. So whether you're dangling your toe in, or you're frantically flailing in need of a lifesaver, we hope the pages that follow will give you a fresh perspective. Let us give you permission to change the way you approach ministry so that you, your family, and your relationship with Christ can continue to grow in a healthy way.

Let us hold up road signs to help you avoid or find your way out of bad ministry habits. And most importantly, we want you to know that yes, you, part-time youth worker, you are not alone!

SECTION 1: FAMILY AND PERSONAL LIFE

A quick look at the table of contents will reveal a few things: one, how many pages are in this book—I (Jeremiah) am always looking at that!—and two, how we've organized the content. Notice the order in which we will be addressing the three main areas of life: family/personal, professional, and ministry. You could say we are saving the best for last, but the truth is, we've put the most important first.

We want to be clear that the importance of keeping your family and personal life healthy is priority numero uno! Your work life and your ministry life are going to demand a LOT from you, but keep in mind that the more demands that are placed on you, the more that will be placed on your family, friends, and your spiritual and mental health! In this section we're going to take a look at common confusion about priorities, the burnout factor, and how part-time youth ministry will affect every part of your life, not just what you do at church a couple of times each week.

I (Sarah) love that we're putting family first in the book, but to be honest (which we'll be throughout), we've messed this up—a lot. We're glad we've survived the process of learning these lessons, and we're glad to share this journey with you.

**CHAPTER 1:
KNOW WHAT
YOU'RE ASKING
OF THEM**

DO YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING?

The bait-and-switch routine is the age-old, diabolical scheme of the used-car salesman. We've all heard the astonishing promises of a spectacular sale during a car dealership's audacious and over-produced advertisement. They oftentimes promise nothing shy of helping you become a better person with straighter teeth if you just come on down and buy a car for pennies on the dollar. Of course, when you arrive, the deal has been altered drastically and many a poor soul feels like Lando Calrissian being told by Darth Vader, "Pray I don't alter it any further." (Sarah here: Sorry for the dorky Jeremiah reference!) No one enjoys that feeling.

And so whether you're considering taking your first step into part-time youth ministry, or you've already jumped into the deep end, it is imperative to understand that by taking on a ministry (youth or otherwise), you are not only putting an extra helping on your own plate but you also are asking a great deal of your spouse, immediate family, extended family, and friends. Your life changes—in many ways it's better, and in other ways it's busier, but busier doesn't have to be worse.

Youth ministry is not just taking on a second job; it's a ministry. Leading a ministry can get messy. Ministry is doing life together with a group of people, people who are relying on you to walk with them through the hardships, the victories, and the failures. It is incredibly rewarding, but simultaneously incredibly taxing. Teenagers expect instant responses to social media and texts. It's for this reason the decision to jump into youth ministry, while holding down a day job, becomes an investment that everyone in your life makes with you.

There's a good chance that you may have at least a friend or two who really does not have any idea what it is that you "do" at the church. For all they know, you're some kind of recreational employee or dodgeball instructor. Some members of your extended family may even be in that same boat. All they know is that you're not really around that much anymore, they get asked to watch your kids more often, and after these things called "lock-ins" you're pretty grumpy for a few days.

To avoid inflicting the bait-and-switch routine upon every last person you care for, the one word that will continually be brought to your attention throughout this

book is *expectations*. Your need for setting realistic—and sometimes seemingly harsh—expectations cannot be overstated. Expectations not only keep you grounded and energized, but they also communicate the reality of your current situation to your family, your employer, and most importantly to your church and the leaders there. Plus, this will help others in your life to see your passion and love for teenagers. People in your life who may not be open to “churchy things” or a conversation about God will see your love for teenagers and passion for sharing Jesus, and their lives may be changed, too.

If you’re operating with overinflated expectations of what you will be able to accomplish in ministry with the time you have been allotted, life will become very stressful and your frustration level will remain very high. So let’s talk about expectations of yourself and your family.

KNOW WHAT YOU’RE ASKING OF YOUR FAMILY

We fully understand that you may not have a family of your own, but chances are that you have some relatives (parents, siblings, cousins, extended family)

who may enjoy having you around from time to time. Because part-time ministry requires that you have a job that pays the majority of your bills, probably carries your benefits, has its own schedule, and only allots you a certain number of vacation days, you will have to make some scheduling decisions. Realize that you're asking your family to sometimes take a backseat to some of your scheduling decisions.

Making time for ministry sometimes means that family picnics on July 4th are turned into youth picnics. It's perfect because it doesn't require you to burn a vacation day to host a youth event in the summer when students are out of school while you're still at work. But you've also just asked your family to come hang out with a bunch of teenagers and share you—with them. You've also asked your extended family to either reschedule their celebration or have fun without you. Or it might be time for you to look at your schedule and plan a family holiday without teenagers and show your family that they, too, are a priority.

We have two young boys, and we decided early on to do ministry “with” our family. Whenever it makes sense, we included our boys in events and retreats. Our boys happily participate in Super Bowl parties, and

they love to go on retreats. We even take babysitters on the retreats so our boys can be around, but so we can also minister.

Another expectation you're asking of your spouse and kids is to be "the youth pastor's spouse/kids." This lovely title comes with a beautiful glass house that you now get to live in. When we transitioned from volunteers to paid staff, wow, we noticed a difference! Sarah felt the expectations immediately. People liked to complain to her and also asked her numerous questions because, of course, she knew everything about what was going on. We learned quickly to set strong boundaries in this area, which we'll discuss later. Your kids are now the "youth pastor's kids," and people expect different things from them, especially in their behavior. Make sure you watch out for this, and emphasize to church leaders and members that your kids are just kids and the expectations should not be different.

Please remember that how you treat and prioritize your family is your greatest ministry. You can't simply preach "honor your mother and father" and then not live it out. Students have their eyes on us, and we have an amazing and unique opportunity to teach

them the greatest of lessons just by how we love and build our families.

Expectations: Scheduling conflicts are a big pain when doing part-time ministry. Whether your day job is a full-time position or a part-time one, juggling that schedule with ministry is tough. Make sure you know what is expected of you from the leadership at church, and pace yourself. You don't HAVE to take advantage of every holiday or paid day off to do ministry. Do your best to look ahead and pick which ones will be for family—and which will be for ministry (and schedule your family first). Scheduling your family first shows them that they truly are your first priority. Meet with your spouse and schedule out important dates and time with family before you fill up the youth calendar. Schedule “down” days for just your family.

True Story: Somewhere deep into our third year of part-time youth ministry, at Sarah's urging, Jeremiah finally scraped together enough vacation time so we could take our family on a vacation. When we told our boys that we were going to take a trip, our older son asked, “Which side of the dorm do we get to sleep on?” You see, on the most recent trips we had taken, we were accompanied by 20-30 teenagers and we

stayed at youth camps. When we told our boys it was just us and we were staying in a hotel, they weren't quite sure what to do with themselves. While we admire their comfort level of being around teenagers and traveling with the youth group at such young ages (4 and 6), this was an eye-opener that we were making a string of poor decisions in scheduling time away as a family.

Challenge: Take some time to evaluate if you've prioritized ministry over your family. Ask your kids how they'd like to see more family time. Meet with your spouse and review last month's calendar and next month's calendar. Check in with your extended family. Where are they feeling neglected?

TALK TO YOUR FRIENDS

Look, I (Jeremiah) get it. You are doing very, very important work in ministry. It's exciting and you're pumped about it. You're making a difference in the lives of others, and you're a role model for those who may not have one at home. This is why you do ministry. But your friends may not get it. "Seriously, why are you hanging out with teenagers?" "I remember when you were fun!" These are the kinds of questions

and comments you hear!

In our smartphone, social media, space-age world, there is no reason you can't stay in contact with your friends. It's healthy and beneficial to stay connected to your friends. They're your friends; they chose to like you. Your family has no choice; they're stuck with you. But your friends have invested in you intentionally. Blowing them off because you're too busy doing "important" things tells them that they are no longer "important" in your life. It's true you may see them less, but there's no reason to stay any less connected with them.

Try your best to pay attention when things are happening in their lives. We spend so much time pouring into teenagers that when we're around our friends, we dump on them without listening to their stories, too. While they probably don't mind hearing about some of your life with teenagers (it's a major part of your life, obviously), try to not talk about the students and their problems ALL the time. Don't forget to check in with your friends' lives. Remember, you're doing life with your friends, too.

Expectations: Let your friends know that your

schedule is busy! You're working (at least) two jobs now—they will get that. Do your best to reach out to them regularly (social media, texts, and actual phone calls), and not just when you have a prayer request. Ask them how their lives are going, and pour into them when you can. Or better yet, encourage them to keep you honest and check in with you from time to time. And challenge yourself to maintain and invest in the your friendships with people outside of church. Don't treat relationships—friends, family, and otherwise—as a convenience.

True Story: It's a sad truth that over our years in ministry we've alienated some of our close friends. It's been a little easier for Sarah to maintain friendships because of working from home and having time to meet for lunches and play dates with the boys and our friends' children, but friendships outside of “church friends” have been strained. This is not to say that our friends from church aren't real friends, but serving in part-time youth ministry alters the dynamics of some friendships. Our friends also just see us as incredibly busy and don't want to “bother” us with hanging out.

But oh, how we need those nights with friends where we don't talk ministry! We've learned to take the initiative and schedule time with friends. Show your friends that you still need them and want to spend time with them. And make sure you focus on them and not just on you and ministry during your time together.

Challenge: Plan a night out with your friends. Don't talk about youth ministry at all. See how they react.

So we've come to the end of the first chapter. Thanks for reading thus far. We want to take a second to clarify that we understand that so many times our family lives, work lives, and ministry lives do not fit into three perfectly clean areas that all stay within their safe boundaries. The lines get blurred, and ministry and personal lives especially become entangled in one another. But continuing to align priorities in those three areas and creating some of your own boundaries is a great start to achieving balance and maintaining health—physically, mentally, and spiritually.