

Things We've Learned in Youth Ministry

Part One: Tips from Seasoned Youth Workers

Whether you are just beginning or several years down the road serving in youth ministry leadership these two Compass Points share some personal learnings and wisdom to help you in your journey. You may find confirmation of learnings you have experienced or find helpful tips and reminders as you move forward. Here are two Compass Points from seasoned youth workers (Part One) and from someone having recently completed her first year (Part Two).

Collectively, we have almost 60 years of youth ministry experiences, some good, some great, some meh, and some...not so good. Through it all we have learned and seen quite a bit in our calls in youth ministry. Here are some of the things that have stuck out to us the most that we thought might be helpful to you.

God has called you into ministry with young people, trust it. We've all wondered about what we have gotten ourselves into and had doubts about what we're doing at some point. Anyone who says differently has just blocked it from their memory. Being called into youth ministry doesn't mean you have all the answers, and it doesn't mean you know exactly what you are doing. Even veterans have walked into a new situation and felt tested. But know, there is a reason God called you into youth ministry – you have gifts and skills for youth ministry; there is a reason your congregation called you – they see something in you that they believe can help their young people grow in their faith; there is a reason you answered the call – you have a passion for working with young people and helping them grow as disciples. God has called you, trust in that call.

Know your “Why”. Simon Sinek, in his book *Start with Why* and [in his TED Talk](#), talks about the importance of knowing why you do what you do. Programming, events, small groups, Sunday night youth groups – these are what we do and how we do it. Your “why” is the reason you do what you do. Obviously the big “why” in ministry is Jesus Christ, but why do you do youth ministry in the way in which you do - which can be different for all of us depending on our context. But knowing your why is the foundation for everything you do in your ministry, and it gives you a lens in which to evaluate what you do. If it helps you meet your why – you keep it; If it doesn't, then let it go. Knowing your why can help you sort through all the possibilities, models, programs, curricula, etc., so that you can build a ministry that lasts. It also helps you share your vision when a parent asks you why you are/aren't doing that lock-in.

Every young person is different, and every young person learns differently. You might be saying to yourself, “duh”, but it is true. The idea of *Multiple Intelligences* is a human development theory originally proposed by Howard Gardner. You can learn plenty about this on the internet, but the idea is that because everyone learns differently, we need to account for that in our teaching styles and in our planning in youth ministry. For example, you might love playing games and love to learn through doing activities, but those young people who learn by music, by art, or by logic – they might be getting left out which also might mean they may not find it meaningful. If our teaching and planning is varied, we can better reach all our young people, and not just a few.

Establish and maintain healthy boundaries - yourself, young people, and staff. First, take care of yourself! We can easily get ourselves in a position where we give more of our time than we expected to or than we should.

Block out time that you are not working - no emails, no text messages, and no phone calls. If it's helpful for you, add that time into your calendar.

Second, boundaries with your young people. Your child protection policy will lay out many of these boundaries to help establish a good and positive relationship with them. It's important for the young people to know that you are there for them, but it doesn't mean all access.

Third, boundaries with staff. If you have expectations placed on you that don't seem quite right, they probably aren't. It's more than okay to advocate for yourself when that happens. In most cases, it's appropriate to go to the Head of Staff. When it isn't, go to the Personnel Committee. If you haven't identified who those folks are, do so now and ask that one of them be made your liaison. They can help advocate for you when needed.

Don't be afraid to try something different. We have a lot of great ideas but not all of them are going to work and that is okay! Ideas that don't work are what gets us to those that do. It's all a learning process. When you have those things that flop, use them as a learning opportunity. Assess what you did. Ask the youth to share with you what they did and didn't like about it. Work with the Youth Committee to review it as well. It could be that the timing was off, and it would be better to save it for another time. Or, it could be the youth just didn't really have any interest in it. Don't use this as a tool to assess your ministry as a whole or how you are doing. Look at it for what it is - a learning opportunity.

Don't worry about biblical knowledge before young people graduate, focus on building relationships. This is not to say that biblical knowledge isn't important, it is, but just knowing famous Bible verses, how many books there are, etc., that's just knowing facts. If, however, we focus on relationships (relationships between young people themselves, between youth and adults, between youth and the church, and most importantly between youth and God) we create an atmosphere that promotes a lifelong engagement with the scriptures and with faith. Biblical knowledge is a good thing, but it's also fluid because as our experiences change, so too, does our understanding. By building relationships, a foundation is formed that encourages and promotes a lifelong engagement with scripture, with faith, and with God.

Your relationship with parents is just as important as your relationship with young people. We've talked about the importance of a young person's relationships within youth ministry, but just as important is your relationship as the youth worker with the parents of your young people. Building these relationships builds trust; trust in you as the leader, trust in the adults working with the young people, and trust in the ministry itself. Building this relationship is more than just good, clear communication and following through on what you say you're going to; but getting to know the parents and allowing parents to get to know you can help deepen that trust and then parents will really begin to buy into not only what you are doing but why you are doing it.

Youth group is not the only point of connection for young people. Youth Group ISN'T for every youth. It can be a nightmare for introverts. This may cause some restlessness for parents, church members, and possibly you but it's okay. We know that young people have very different needs and while many of them love gathering at church on a Sunday or Wednesday night to see all their friends, there are some who would rather not. Even though it may not feel like it, our young people can be involved in the church right alongside any church member. Other ways to involve young people are to:

- Join an usher team.
- Participate in an all-church Bible study. If a topic is being offered church-wide that interests a few of your youth, encourage them to join that group with some different age groups rather than create a group of just young people.
- Lead a children's class or activity. You may have young people that really enjoy children. Allow them to teach a class. When they work to prepare a lesson, they can learn just as much or more than if they were in a Bible study themselves.

- Assist in worship. This could be through a reading, musical offering, writing a prayer, or a dramatic presentation.
- Crafting group - maybe you have a couple of youth who would like to learn to knit (or other skills and crafts). Pair them up with a couple of crafters from the congregation. Provide them a space in the church but allow them to direct the group according to their interest. The fellowship with church members that can come from this will stay with them through adulthood.
- Bakers - do you have young people who like to bake? Have them join the group that provides funeral luncheons. They can bake cookies or cakes that can be an offering to the family of the loved one.
- Writers - have them adopt an older congregation member and send them notes. You never know that person might just write back!

The best way to serve youth - introverts and extroverts - is to get to know them. Once you know their gifts, you will be better able to help them connect with the church and their faith.

Know your insurance policy. UGH! This is going to impact your programming more than you think. In addition to your Child Protection Policy, know what your insurance policy says about gathering and traveling as a youth group. Does your insurance policy have additional requirements about how you can gather that may not be in your church's Child Protection Policy? Additionally, look at the regulations around travel. Are there certain types of vehicles that you cannot use or rent? Does the driver have to be of a certain age? Does your policy cover an accident on a rental vehicle? (You may not need to use extra money for your budget if it is already covered.) All of these requirements and regulations will adjust how you plan your activities with young people.

For Part 2 see **Compass Points - Things I've Learned Youth Ministry: Tips from my First Year**

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