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Volunteer Youth Ministry

A Roadmap For Effective Leadership

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Foreword

Dennis has been doing youth ministry for over 20 years, and for 10 of those years, I had the privilege of working alongside him and observing firsthand the principles you'll soon read. I like Dennis a lot! He's quirky, weird, loving, deep, playful, smart, and deeply caring for teenagers. He has been an amazing volunteer youth worker. His experience and passion for youth ministry presents itself throughout these pages in practical, easy-to-read wisdom. He has also filled this book with helpful bullet points that simplify how to put what he's learned into action in your own setting. There's some content that I couldn't pull off because my personality is different than Dennis (and you might find that true for you too), but 90% of his ideas will work for anyone regardless of personality.

Whether you're a new volunteer or a seasoned veteran, you'll learn something from Dennis' words. I don't write the foreword to many books, mostly because I don't have the time to read them cover-to-cover... but this one grabbed me. I started to skim it but then caught myself saying, "Ohh, that's good Dennis—that will be super helpful to the world of youth ministry." I'm proud of the work he has done both in youth ministry and in writing this book. It made me excited to see what he releases next—keep your eye on this guy and open your heart to learn from someone who has been a great volunteer youth worker who has been dedicated to help others like you. You'll be happy to have this helpful ebook in your library.

Keep learning and leading,

Doug Fields
Co-founder of Downloadyouthministry.com

Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

My mom, Georgya Crane

Volunteer Youth Ministry

A Roadmap for Effective Leadership

Introduction

I'm the guy who always skips the introduction to a book. This book will make a lot more sense if you don't skip the introduction. It sets the stage for what you're about to experience. Have fun. Thanks for reading. ~ Dennis

Who am I?

Isn't life amazing? We mostly get to spend it however we choose. Notice I didn't write "however we want." Some people "choose" to do life in a way they don't "want" to please others or because of conditions beyond their control. How they live within those conditions, however, is their choice: their attitude, how they treat others, how they present themselves, etc.

That's my story. My desire was not to go into youth ministry. I specifically did not want to work with students when I was preparing for ministry in college... at least not for the first couple of years. It was a youth ministry internship I did the summer after my sophomore year that ruined my life, wait, I mean steered me toward youth ministry. In my mind, I was taking the easy and fun route by doing the internship. Why spend my summer doing hard stuff, right? I was only doing that internship to check off a box on my list of requirements for college. God had other plans.

When the internship was over, I was left with a curious, "hmmm." I wasn't ready to go full throttle into youth ministry, but I needed to look into this more. I didn't like that idea because it didn't fit in with my plans, but I had to check it out.

That “hmmm” was just curious enough that I took a youth ministry class my junior year of college. It flourished into a full-blown charge into youth ministry, leaving behind the plans of seminary and the dream of being a pastor of a small church in the middle of nowhere. I wasn’t skilled for the task, yet, but the choice take the youth ministry path was a no-looking-back shift in how I chose to use my life.

My first post-college youth ministry experience was as a volunteer in a mid-size church north of Seattle, Washington. I was the 7th grade boys’ junior high Sunday School teacher. While a good learning experience, the best learning I took away from that ministry was the need for me to not work with junior high school students. I’m more of a high-school-ministry guy.

After Seattle, I served as the staff youth pastor for a church in Roseburg, Oregon, got fired twice. From there, I became the youth pastor at a church on the surface of the sun, where I also got fired. I had the good sense to leave before they changed their minds like my previous church did. Youth ministry was off to a rough start; being fired 3 times from 2 churches in 3 years.

With my calling questioned (not by me, but by others), ego bruised, and determination to continue on unwavering, I did what any good college graduate without a job does; I moved home to mama’s house in Southern California. I took a temporary job while I waited on God for my next move. I also knew I needed time to slow down, heal and learn.

During this hiatus from professional youth ministry, I decided I wanted to learn as much as I could about ministry. Both of the churches where I served were pretty small. Neither had an aver-

age Sunday morning attendance over 250 people. I figured there must be reasons some small churches stay small, while other churches see amazing growth. I didn’t want to learn any new lessons about small churches, so I turned my attention toward large ones.

The second place I visited was Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA. I was at this new church not only to learn, but also to be spiritually fed and find healing from my previous youth ministry fiascoes. I didn’t have any intention of staying long term or serving at this church. I just wanted to hide in the crowd for a while, learn and heal. That was in December of 1998. I’m still there as of this writing in 2016.

The reason I’m writing this book is, after 20+ years as a youth worker (sometimes paid, but mostly volunteer), I thought I should do for others what I wish I had been humble enough to let somebody do for me when I was first starting out... and failing. This book is a mental dump of what I’ve learned about youth ministry - both from training and personal experiences doing youth ministry. I’ve organized it the best I can and tried to keep it interesting and hopefully a fun read.

I hope you enjoy it and someday do the same for other youth ministry leaders who could use a seasoned youth worker pouring wisdom into their efforts.

Perspectives on youth ministry

Regardless of your denominational affiliation (or lack of one), there are some basics of youth ministry we can all agree on. I am not pretending to write that book. I like what my pastor says,

“In a marriage, if you both agree on everything, one of you isn’t necessary”. The same could be said for a discussion on youth ministry. It should challenge our thinking, help us evaluate and improve.

What I want to do is share youth ministry from the perspective I’ve gained over the years of good and embarrassingly bad ministry experiences and decisions I’ve made, or been impacted by. Feel free to agree, scoff, throw this book in anger (maybe not since it’s on your expensive e-book reader), write me emails for clarification or to continue the conversation.

I’m not the guy you see on stage in front of thousands of youth workers teaching everybody how to do it. I’m that guy over there in the trenches sitting with a "small" group of 19 boys doing my best to teach them to make God the center of their lives. My only qualification, and it’s a good one, is that I’ve done it since 3 years before dirt was invented. You can’t do anything for that long without having something to say on the subject.

The cool thing is I’m publishing this as an e-book without any big name publishers telling me I can’t say something or that I need to write it in a different way. This is me sharing some barely filtered memories tied to a few bullet points along the way I think you’ll benefit from.

Approach to writing this book

My approach to writing this book is with the newbie in mind, but also still be very beneficial to the veteran youth worker. I’m telling the good, bad and the ugly of youth ministry so you know I’ve been where you’ve been (or where you’re heading). I hope

to equip you with determination to last for the long haul, loan you some wisdom as you develop your own on the subject, and encourage you to be yourself as you mentor students to be themselves with God as their center.

What I hope to accomplish

If you come away from this book more in love with God, humble, but less scared and confused, more equipped for the task of youth ministry, and dedicated to your calling more than you were when you signed up, I’ve met the goal.

Some of you might be scared off from youth ministry by this book. That’s okay, but I hope most stay. It’s an amazing way to choose to invest your life.

Chapter 1: Relationships

Order out of chaos

Relationships are the core of youth ministry. In the messiness of relationships, there are minefields we must learn to navigate, subtleties we must learn to pick up on, and potential we must be determined to mine. The mess is the ministry.

Serving students can be like untangling 100 strands of last year's Christmas lights while wearing a blindfold. It's not a linear movement from point A to point B. For example, you know that student on fire for Christ last year who is doing what she swore she'd never do just a few months later? Yeah, that's the kind of stuff I'm talking about. It's difficult. Students lose focus, but that's what we're here for; to help them make sense of life in the context of the redemption story God is working out in them.

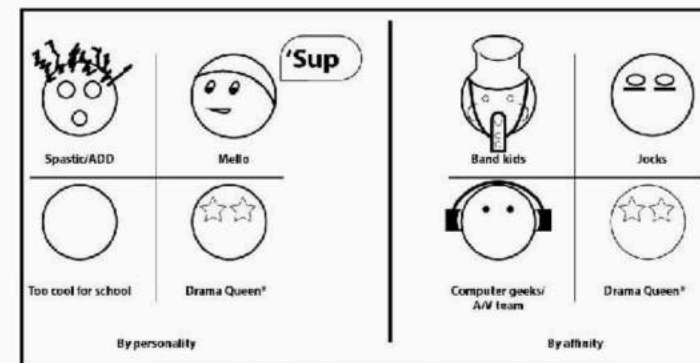
Youth workers, therefore, must be very intentional about building relationships within a youth ministry inundated with fragile, disrespectful, cocky, or wallflower students (and leaders). This is can be tricky.

You don't need me to go into detail about what relationships are. Instead, I'm going to focus this chapter on sharing some insights I've learned about them along the way. To keep our ministries from going the way mine did as I was getting started (read the introduction if you don't know what I'm referring to), here's what we can do as leaders to keep the ministry thriving.

Relating to Students

Fortunately, we serve a God who creates order out of chaos. To bring mental order into a chaotic youth ministry environment, it helps to figure out where things go; getting mentally organized. There are several ways you can get organized simply by categorizing students.

Here are two long-standing, relevant-through-the-generations examples of how students could be categorized (double-tap the image to enlarge it):



Notice the Drama Queens have their own groups in both categories. You're welcome.

With the students organized in your mind, you can begin one of the most important tasks of getting started in youth ministry; putting yourself into one of those categories you just made for the students. That's your comfort zone. You understand those kids because of your own past, issues, hobbies, etc. You don't get paralyzed with fear at the prospect of engaging these students because you can easily relate to them.

The students you affiliate with naturally will likely have some level of familiarity with students who you might feel intimidated

to reach out to. Those students you can relate to are the open door to connecting with other students outside your comfort zone. Reach out to students you easily connect with first without the guilt of temporarily neglecting the students who intimidate or scare you - or who you might intimidate or scare.

Here's how that worked in my story

My first experience volunteering with the high school ministry of my current church was sheer horror. Keep in mind, I had already been a youth pastor in two other churches before coming to Saddleback Church. I was completely caught off guard by the messy-ness and inner terror I felt during that first encounter.

Mike, the volunteer coordinator, welcomed me as I walked into the youth room... which was more like a youth stadium compared to anything I'd known before. There were kids from wall to wall; HUNDREDS of them sitting around tables loosely divided by schools. Mike told me to go pick a table and get to know the students. My imitation of a tree in a petrified forest must have clued him into the fact that I needed more than a verbal nudge.

He put his hand on my shoulder and invited a couple of student leaders over to meet me. Telling them it was my first week as a leader, he asked them to have me sit at their table just to observe this week. It was still awkward, but at least I had a temporary place to belong.

I floundered in our High School Ministry for about 6 months trying to find my inroad with the students. I was determined to last, but it was very difficult for this wallflower to find a niche in

the noisy mob of students who were already familiar with each other. I showed up faithfully each week to sit at a table of students. Each week the students who sat with me were different from the previous week. Connections weren't happening.

Here's how that changed. It has everything to do with what I wrote about finding your comfort zone. Summer camp came around. I took a week off work and hopped on the bus to camp. There were about 300 students on the roster, but only around 30 on my bus. I could deal with 30. I can break out of being a wallflower in a crowd that size.

I made a point to get to know those in the seats around me. I drilled them with questions and shared stories from my life that pertained to what they shared. By the end of that 2-hour bus ride, I was in touch with how I fit in with who they are. The wall was coming down. I was relating to students through our commonalities - mostly by sharing the joy of laughing at funny stories at this point.

That year we had camp on a boat. They called it Camp Cruise. It was amazing. Something I found especially helpful was the cabins were small staterooms that only held a few students. I can deal with a group of 6 cabin guys even better than a bus of 30. Ministry was getting easier and I was getting better.

After that week of camp, serving at the High School Ministry weekend services was suddenly amazing. Students were no longer a sea of unfamiliar faces. We had inside stories, shared spiritual experiences, got sea sick over the side of the boat

together, and more. The cold, distant crowd I had been lost in for 6 months had finally discovered I was there. I had discovered the students I connected with best and we were on our way.

Here's a free don't-let-this-happen-to-you nugget I gleaned from a painfully embarrassing experience on that trip: Don't pray for your students by name as a group if you're not completely certain you know their names. YIKES! So painfully awkward that first night when I tried to do that. Learn those names ASAP.

Finding My Affinity

The group I affiliate with best are freshmen boys who tend to be bashful. They're not into sports, not super popular and are highly interested in computers/technology. After camp, my table at each weekend service was full of these guys because we connected that week at camp. We connect so well because I was pretty shy in high school and I've always been interested in technology.

My favorite grade of students to start out with is freshmen because I don't have to coax them to talk... I just have to stop teaching every few seconds during small group to get them to be quiet. I can deal with that.

One cool thing about leading these types of guys is when they trust me, they feel safe to be on the outside what they wish they were from the inside. *(Reread that last sentence - building trust will revolutionize students' self esteem and school experience)* It's amazingly fun to lead them out of their shells and be an example to them not only for how to live a godly life, but how to let their guards down with the world around them.

If you're new to your student ministry, take a lesson from me. I was a veteran when I started at my current church, but still had trouble getting started. Here are the keys to getting relationships going when first starting out:

- Find where you fit
- Stay committed
- Participate in special events (like camp)

Here's another example of how affinity helps me connect with students. In the group of students about to graduate from my life group is a kid named Hector. Hector's life mirrors my own at his age in many ways.

Most of the similarities we share are obstacles he's overcoming that I also had to overcome as a kid. I remember being his age and wishing an older version of me could come help me deal with what I was going through. I get to be that guy for Hector. That's the ultimate affinity connection.

The cool thing is I've already met Silas, the kid who will take Hector's place in my group of Freshmen next year. You'll do well to have students in your group who are like you were at their age. That's when youth ministry goes from good to amazing.

Building relational skills in students

Many students need direction with their social skills. Our role as youth workers is not to only deal with their spiritual well-being, but helping them become ambassadors for Christ. In our age of technology, interpersonal connections can be replaced by Insta-

gram likes and Snap Chat stories.

This is more of a cultural thing than it is a slam against students. Within my own life group this is quite a struggle. My personal evidence of this is the many text messages I send that get mostly ignored by them. Getting students engaged in something bigger than their world can require a degree in social engineering.

I prefer to use natural consequences to help my students feel the pain of not being relational. Their own regret is a much better teacher than I am in this area. They feel the sting from within, rather than being brought into submission by the adult telling them what they should or shouldn't do. *It doesn't hurt that I have a lesser-know spiritual gift - passive aggressiveness; my tool of choice to deal with my students' lack of social skills.*

Here's an example of when this worked best: Disneyland is a pretty big deal where I live. A friend gave me five 3-Day passes for both Disneyland and California Adventure. To teach my boys a lesson about the importance of texting back, the week before Spring Break I sent a message to them which read, "If you're on Spring Break next week and don't have plans, you really want to respond to this message to let me know."

When none of them responded, I gave the tickets (worth a total of \$1675) away to other people not in our group. After Spring Break, I told them what they missed out on by not responding to my message. Lesson taught; but they are still not the best at responding to text messages.

Another example of a time I did this...

I texted my students to remind them about Mystery Fun Day, an event we had discussed after a Bible study one night. I asked them to let me know if they were going. Only a few responded. They were the only ones I sent details of the event to.

Those who responded to the message had a blast! We went bowling, had lunch at Costco, roller skated, played miniature golf and watched the sunset over the ocean followed by a polar bear club. Students who didn't go felt left out. #ThatWasThePoint.

To get them to go on this event, I could have chased after them by calling them, calling their parents, stalking them at school, etc. However, I like to teach responsibility by natural consequences when possible. I didn't cause them to miss out, but those who missed out did so because they lacked the social skills of responding to a text message. When they saw the pictures on social media and heard stories of all the fun we had, they got the message.

When asked why they didn't respond to the text message, one of my students responded, "Because I didn't know who else was going to go."

This shouts:

- He's insecure and probably hurting inside
- He doesn't want to take a risk into the unknown
- He's too concerned about his own comfort

Along these same lines, here are some of the inner struggles

students use to gauge their worth:

- Why doesn't anybody like my Instagram post? // **Loneliness**
- Why wasn't I invited to that event all my friends are posting on social media? // **Rejection**
- I'm awesome because I have more friend requests waiting to be accepted than most. // **Pride and measuring worth in shallow, meaningless ways**

Youth workers who understand where students find their value will have an easier time deeply impacting them.

The next time we did Mystery Fun Day, we had a much better turn out. #LessonLearned #BehaviorChanged...a little

I still have issues with students responding to text messages, but it's getting better.

Teach the kid some manners

Last week we had a special week in my Life Group. We did one of the traditions I'll write about later - Alumni Night. To make the night extra special, I provided dinner for the group before we got started and dessert for after the group. I texted them to let them know about the special night and to say come hungry.

The one kid who responded had this conversation with me by text message:

The kid: What exactly r we doing

Me: You'll see when you get here.

The kid: Can u at least tell me what we r going to eat

Me: Nope. It's food you've had before.

The kid: if it chik fil a, i don't want it ;)

Me: I'd appreciate it if you don't try to make me regret spending a lot of money on you guys today.

The kid: ik, im joking, don't worry

Me: I know. I'm just teaching you some manners. :-)

The kid: lol, i thought that was my moms job

Me: We're a team

The kid: lol, alright, see u tonight

Me: Yup :-)

Here are some youth ministry principles involved in that type of

This concludes the sample of Volunteer Youth Ministry: A Roadmap for Effective Leadership.

You may purchase the full version of this book by visiting volunteeryouthministry.com/book