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Professional Youth Ministry: A Changing Landscape

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In 1994 I was 20 years old, studying electrical engineering, trying to play basketball, and working 10 hours a week as an intern at a Methodist church in Memphis. That summer I attended a youth ministry event in the North Carolina Mountains.

All week long as I sat through worship services, led a small group, and participated in the event's activities, I heard God whispering to me that I was called to a life ministering to teenagers. I did my best to put off the voice; I was nervous as it was working with the teenagers under my care at the event.

One evening I took a walk and ended up sitting on a bridge overlooking the water. Then God asked me, "Why can't you do it?" God didn't need to tell me what "it" was—I already knew. And I had my excuses ready.

"Well, the money isn't very good," I replied.

God said, "That's awfully selfish."

I knew it was, so I said, "What about basketball and engineering?"

God replied, "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

After a long moment, I replied, "Alright, let's do it."

I walked off that bridge a different person—one who knew and believed God's purpose for his life.

I headed back to school, changed my major from engineering to religion, and began to ask the question, “How do you become a professional youth minister?”

In the meantime I transferred to another college—engineering schools aren’t known for their religion programs as much as they’re known for racking up debt.

But I continued to ask that question: “How do you become a professional youth minister?”

Fourteen years ago the answers were frustrating—and they haven’t changed much today. Primarily I was told that I really wasn’t called to be a youth minister; instead I should be a pastor. I found no comfort in that. My desire was walk into a room full of pastors (and even bishops) and have them respect my call and ministry as much as anyone else’s.

So, the question remains: *What makes a professional youth minister? A seminary degree? Ordination? At least 10 years of experience?*

Recently I participated in a youth ministry think tank that brought together 20 veteran youth ministers and youth ministry educators. We explored how youth ministers were being equipped for ministry and how the equipping could improve. The following are the major areas we identified as important components in the formation of youth ministers.

The Call

The call to youth ministry is a distinctive call. Without a call upon your life, your time in professional youth ministry will be limited. Although youth ministry as a stepping-stone or practice ground for “real” ministry is on the decline, we have a long way to go before the broader church recognizes youth ministry as a long-term profession.

I recently spoke with a pastor who was hiring a young youth minister. He said to me, “We’ll help her with her schooling, because we want her to be able to move into other forms of ministry as she gets older.”

I asked why she couldn’t continue in youth ministry as she gets older. His response? “Well, I’m 62; I couldn’t do youth ministry at my age. I’m too old.”

That did it. He hit one of my buttons.

After taking a deep breath, I told him that he had completely offended my call to ministry; I had every intention of doing youth ministry when I was 65. He couldn’t do ministry with youth at 62, not because he was too old, but because youth ministry wasn’t his distinct call.

Youth ministry is only about 30 years old as a profession, and I thank God for those in my life who’ve been doing it 25 or more years. I pray they’ll make it through another 10—that way the church will begin to have some examples of 65-year-old youth ministers who still play messy games.

(Although I believe in youth ministry lifers, I also recognize that God’s call is continuously revealed to us, and that some who begin in youth ministry

will be called by God into other areas of ministry. Some of the greatest pastors in the country were trained in the trenches of youth ministry.)

Youth Ministry Education

Youth ministry is one of the fastest growing majors in the country.

Textbooks now exist that are focused on the theology of youth ministry, adolescent teaching techniques, and the growing culture. Princeton, Fuller, Luther, and Asbury seminaries started graduate youth ministry programs in the 1990s in order to address the need of educating those who feel called to youth ministry. These schools developed a base of knowledge that they felt a youth minister should acquire, including adolescent development, Christian education, and the changing needs of culture. For the first time, ministry education was focused through the lens of the youth minister instead of the pastor.

And once degrees are acquired, professional youth ministers can add to their youth ministry education through everything from conventions, workshops, and retreats to intensive weeklong classes that some seminaries offer that let participants dive even deeper.

The acquisition of youth ministry education isn't necessarily an indicator of youth ministry effectiveness, but it is helping to raise the professionalism of youth ministry.

Theological and Biblical Knowledge

Professional youth ministers take seriously their role in developing the spiritual lives of teenagers and in making disciples for Christ. But the vast majority of them have had no youth ministry training, and even fewer have had any biblical or theological training.

The National Study on Youth and Religion shows that our churches and youth ministries are teaching a shallow theology and faith. As youth ministry grows as a profession, it's essential that youth ministers develop theological and biblical knowledge—after all, we can teach young people only what we ourselves know.

If you're at a place in life where you can do it, an undergraduate religion degree provides a good foundation for theological and biblical knowledge. If you're not, understand that you don't necessarily need to pursue a degree to gain this knowledge; you can learn by taking or auditing classes from a local seminary. You can become an avid reader.

And if you're mentoring youth ministers, encourage them to develop knowledge in this area.

Practical Training and Experience

I worked in the local church for four years before going to seminary. One of my best friends went to seminary straight out of college and got an M.Div. with an emphasis in youth ministry. After he'd been working a church for

about six months, he said to me out of frustration, "I've got a degree in youth ministry and can't get 20 kids to come to my youth ministry; you don't know squat and have 200 kids coming to your church."

If we'd been asked to take a youth ministry test or write a youth ministry paper, my friend would have gotten an A+ and I might have made a C. He had an incredible amount of head knowledge about youth ministry, but he had little practical experience to help him transfer his knowledge of youth ministry into reality.

Learning on the job is an essential part of youth ministry. The best way to understand kids is to get to know them. You can read all the how-to-work-with-parents books and volunteer books in the world, but actually doing it will teach you so much more. The adolescent world is ever changing, and the only way to stay in touch is to be immersed in it.

Mentoring

I place high value on youth ministry internships where the interns can learn from someone who's leading and guiding them. Several new youth ministry training programs are incorporating coaching into their curriculums so that those who go through the training will benefit from someone who's "been there and done that."

Peer relationships in youth ministry are also an important component of professional youth ministry sustainability. Veteran youth ministers learn to learn from each other as they continue to grow in their own ministries.

As we seek to raise the level of youth ministry professionalism, it's crucial that we focus on these broad areas—doing so will allow youth ministers to serve competently and, in turn, build long-term sustainability. If you're just starting out in youth ministry, look for opportunities to develop yourself in all these areas. If you're stuck and need something to get you going, look for the holes in your own development.

I pray we'll all become lifetime learners—not in order that we become "more professional," but instead to expand our gifts to reach the next generation for Christ.