

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	7
Preface	9
Introduction: Do Teenagers Have a Prayer?	11

PART 1: LEADING

1. The Essential of Leadership in Student Ministry (Steve Vandegriff)	25
2. The Essential of Youth Workers Knowing Their Roles (Steve Vandegriff)	37
3. The Essential of Defining the Student Pastor (Rich Brown)	51
4. The Essential of Developing Effective Leaders (Rich Brown)	69
5. The Essential of Parents—The Other Side of the Student Ministry (Steve Vandegriff)	93

PART 2: NURTURING

6. The Essential of Understanding Today's Students (Steve Vandegriff)	105
7. The Essential of Intergenerational Student Ministry (Steve Vandegriff)	119
8. The Essential of Developing Spiritual Formation (Steve Vandegriff)	131
9. The Essential of Biblically Centered Teaching (Rich Brown)	143
10. The Essential of a Biblically Centered Lesson (Rich Brown)	159

PART 3: REACHING

11. The Essential of Competent Programming (Rich Brown)	172
12. The Essential of Equipping Students for Outreach (Rich Brown)	189
13. The Essential of Intentional Outreach Events (Rich Brown)	205
14. The Essential of Campus Ministry (Steve Vandegriff)	219
15. The Essential of Partnering with Other Ministries (Steve Vandegriff)	231
Conclusion	241

THE ESSENTIAL OF

LEADERSHIP IN STUDENT MINISTRY

The average churchgoer may not completely understand what it means to be a leader in the church. In fact, many assume that the student ministry leader only works two days a week, and when he is around he is just playing ultimate Frisbee and playing music just a little too loud. Unless someone needs to unload some old couches or is looking for some cheap movers, the churchgoer is satisfied in letting the students live in their world as long as it doesn't mess with their own. The student ministry leader can have the unique task of helping students pursue God, shepherding them and being examples, while navigating the waters of conflicting church culture around them.

For the purpose of this chapter, I have decided to define this position as the "student ministry leader." There are many reasons for this, but the primary one is this: it is simply difficult to paint this position with a broad brush. As we will discuss, many different variations can appear among leaders who work with students. So when you see "student ministry leader" mentioned, feel free to apply that term to your own context, understanding that we are doing our best to come to an agreement that this is anyone who desires to lead and shepherd the minds and souls of students toward a greater love and devotion to Jesus Christ.

For those already in student ministry, the following story of student ministry resistance and hesitation may not be of any surprise. For those who are looking forward to, or are beginning student ministry, this might surprise you.

When I was in a seminary course for youth ministry, our Professor brought in our Greek Professor who was relatively well known—in the kind of strange circles that seminary professors have name recognition, that is. He shared with our class that youth ministry was a failed experiment. It was unbiblical, he said, and we should all quit. While I think it is a good thing to bring in different perspectives in an educational environment, this decision lacked direction and conviction. Our visiting Professor’s arguments were many, but primarily he argued that intergenerational churches create better disciples than those with segmented groups. His argument wasn’t completely invalid, but it did ignore a fundamental understanding in the exercise of contextualization.

Being that we were in a youth ministry class, many of us were youth pastors already or we were training to be one in the future. One of the students raised his hand and said, “Sir, you have successfully talked me out of a job!” My heart sank. While nothing compares to my love for my Savior, my love for seeing students embrace Him as well was a close second. I asked our guest lecturer if he planned to retire. He indicated that he did indeed plan to retire one day. I reminded him that retirement was not a Biblical concept, yet it was something that existed within our culture. To ignore retirees and tell them that they don’t exist because of their unseen recognition within Scripture is to truly misunderstand what it means to reach out to our culture. Contextualization takes culture into consideration. It helps us bridge the gap between the message of the Gospel and the world that we live in. I hope that in that classroom I was able to encourage a few students who had otherwise felt as if they were being led down the wrong path in pursuing student ministry.¹

Student ministry is consistently on the frontlines and is challenged repeatedly. There are those who say that youth ministry is a “50-year failed experiment.”² These are well-meaning people who misunderstand the purpose of student ministry. Youth pastors used to be the third hire, after the senior pastor and a worship pastor, but this is changing. We are seeing a de-emphasis on student ministry in many churches across denominations. While this chapter doesn’t aim to accomplish the task of affirming student ministry itself, it does

intend to validate our role as leaders and disciplinarians of students. Student pastors are making a difference and do play an important role in ministry.

THE CHANGING FACE OF STUDENT MINISTRY

It is worth noting that the face of student ministry is changing. And while it is important to understand that student ministry is still a prevailing and important part of our church culture—there is not one way to *do* student ministry just as there is not just one way to *be* a student ministry leader. It should come as no surprise that the face of leadership within student ministry is changing, since the culture in which students live is itself moving at a rapid pace. Years ago ministry to students would change or evolve slowly, with the biggest threat being a TV station. (MTV anyone?) Today, trends can wear out in mere weeks or even days, not years. Student ministries chasing relevancy are chasing a moving target.

So, what does the state of leadership look like in student ministry and what can we do to be the best at it we can be?

KINDS OF LEADERS IN STUDENT MINISTRY

Of course, many of the differences found in student ministry leadership are on the surface. Different faith expressions or denominations handle the position of the student leader in a variety of ways. While this is in no way an exhaustive list, here are a few examples of these differences:

The Student Pastor. This may be a position that we are most aware of and usually involves a specific calling to ministry. The student pastor is often seen as a staff position of the pastoral team, though there are occasions where a student pastor may sit at the table as a plural elder, but often the student pastor is seen as an associate pastor who may carry duties outside of student ministry. Depending on the size of the church, the student pastor may also oversee worship or children as a part of his expectations. In larger churches this position may have the opposite effect, where the role is more specific and more specialized.

The Student Director. The student director typically may hold less authority than a pastor might. While there is similarity in job description, often churches will use the term *director* when they expect the leader's role to be more confined within the student ministry itself. While the director is still a part of the overall leadership team, this term can often signify that the leader may be bivocational or lacks certain scholastic or other ritualistic expectations, such as a seminary degree or an ordination.

The Volunteer Student Leader. The volunteer leader is almost certainly bivocational. The leader usually has a desire to help students grow, or maybe has a child of their own in the student ministry. The volunteer leader is not to be overlooked, as this person is an extremely common part of leadership and can be very well suited for the position. This position is typical in a smaller church that may have only a few students and does not require a very dedicated person to excel.

Student Ministry Advisory Board. Many of the more traditional settings will have something similar to an advisory board. This group could work in conjunction with either of the previously mentioned positions as well and generally includes people from all walks of life from the church. The group typically oversees the direction and activities of the student ministry. Members of the board monitor budget, concerns from parents, and can act as a go-between to the senior pastor.

Many factors are leading to nontraditional understandings of the above definitions. Such modifications in titles for the student ministry leader can be interpreted as a change in theological understanding and/or an overall pragmatic change in the role itself. Many treat the role as a stepping-stone to a senior pastor position, or as an entry-level position. What we need to understand is that God can call someone specifically to student ministry with no expectations of moving to be a “real pastor” (a phrase the student pastor becomes all too familiar with). In one church that I am aware of, a student pastor served the church twenty-nine years and retired at age sixty-seven.³ There are those men and women out there who are doing a great job and not looking to use the ministry as a tool to build their resume and experience. It is a joy to see someone who understands and embraces the calling to lead students—finding their satisfaction in blossoming where they’re planted and not looking for what’s next.

MEET DEANA

Deana Dickerson is a student leader who has navigated this path of leadership in student ministry.⁴ She represents an often-overlooked segment of women who struggle to find a place serving in student ministry. While there are differing opinions on the roles of women in ministry, she has walked through this and her story is compelling. She is one of the most gifted middle school student leaders I (Steve) know, and she certainly has much to offer to the discussion. Here is her view of her place in youth ministry within the church:

I realize that the central issue for me in leadership was not so much about gender or acceptance, but about gifting and, even more, about calling. Saying yes to this was saying yes to Jesus and the way He gifted me. In the church, spiritual gifts of women and men should be recognized, developed, and used in serving and teaching ministries like small groups, counseling, administration, pastoral care, and worship. In doing so, the church honors God as the source of our gifts.

Dallas Willard says it well, “It is not the rights of women to occupy ‘official’ ministerial roles, nor their equality to men in those roles that set the terms of their service to God and their neighbors. It is their obligations that do so: obligations which derive from their human abilities empowered by divine gifting. It is the good they can do, and the duty to serve that comes from that, which impels them to serve in all ways possible. Women and men are indeed very different, and those differences are essential to how God empowers each to induce the Kingdom of God into their specific life setting and ministry.”⁵

She realizes her role as a woman in ministry is an area “that has never been free from controversy. I know that my gender can be an issue for some and because of this I have sometimes felt alone.” She cites her monthly meetings with other youth workers in the area: “I am usually one of three ladies in a room full of guys.”

Deana has found true support in her church’s male leaders who regularly encourage her. She calls the experience of leading the middle school group “fun and exciting.”

I have realized over the years that my role as a woman in leadership is vital and important to the overall church. Furthermore, I do a dis-service to God and His purposes if I do not embrace the gifts He has given me, step faithfully into the opportunities He has put before me, and trust that He is with me wherever I go.

So instead of marrying a youth pastor, I became one. This was not how I saw my life playing out. Choosing to trust Jesus with my life and step into the calling of full-time youth ministry has stretched and challenged me in many ways, but it has also been the most rewarding thing I have ever done.

Deana understands her context and is doing her best to excel in the role God has placed her in.

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT STUDENTS AND STUDENT MINISTRY

While each and every expression can have its merits and disappointments, we must keep in mind that ultimately it is important to gain an adequate understanding of how the particular church you serve understands and utilizes each leader it brings to this role. Not fully understanding what may be expected of you, or even to what authority you may have, can be a death sentence—especially if you’re finding those things out as you move through the position. Regardless of which position you walk into, make sure you have a crystal clear understanding of the expectations of you and what the system of leadership is.

Lifeway Research states that roughly 70 percent of young adults drop out of church.⁶ This number is lower than the often-touted “86 percent” of students who don’t stick around; however, it is still a cause for concern. One implication of young adults not sticking around could be that while they connect with the student ministry, they aren’t connecting with the church as a whole. When they make the transition to adult worship, it looks nothing like the silly games and loud music they are most accustomed to. Another factor influencing this outcome is that the students don’t adequately own their own faith before reaching adulthood. When a student is at their most impressionable, we are missing opportunities to invest the gospel into their lives.

Misplaced priorities have held us back and riddled our ministries with great losses of effectiveness. Many leaders have experienced hurt and shouldered the pain of others so much that it has misdirected our own intentions and passions. Pastors have found themselves leading from a negative place, and can even lead from a place of low self-esteem—seeking the approval of others rather than the approval of God.⁷

BETWEEN PRIDE AND GENUINENESS

One of the largest pitfalls of a leader is pride, which applies to both effective and ineffective leaders. The perceived *cool* leader can lean too much on his own confidence and completely lose sight of his dependence on God, while the perceived *uncool* leader can be so focused on trying to impress others to make up for his shortcomings that he has the same result. Whatever the case, we need to grasp that when we fall into one of these pitfalls as a leader that we aren’t just handling a business or an organization, but we are handling the very truth of God.

We all may need to embrace that to be called and follow God into the unknown world of working with students often draws those of us who may be a little different. I want to encourage you to embrace who God has made

you and equipped you to be. Don't try to be someone you aren't. Don't shop at stores geared for teenagers and be that forty-year-old wearing V-necks and slim jeans. Be yourself and let your walk with God be the most obvious thing about you—people will remember your character over your style. (And if they remember your style, it's probably not a good thing.)

Success defined in student ministry can almost always lead to what one pastor labeled as the Three B's: Butts, Budgets, and Buildings. We focus on how many butts are in the seats. (Yes, I know there is some artistic license with this "B.") In fact, one of the first questions one student ministry leader will ask another is, "How many students do you run?" It's the instant size-up. Our concerns play more into our comparisons and self-worth defined by attendance rather than the number of students who are embracing Jesus. Effective leadership in student ministry is not just numbers. You can find a gimmick (that will work for a short period of time, most likely) that can get feet in the door, but it's what you do with them at that point that matters. Focus on the message. Focus on the gospel, the only thing that can change their lives for eternity and give them a greater purpose in life today. Redefine success as a leader and wear it proudly on your sleeve. Our collective strive toward effectiveness is not to see more seats filled, but more hearts filled with the love of Christ.

ATTRIBUTES OF STUDENT MINISTRY LEADERS

There are many things we can do to improve as leaders to help students grow in their transition into adulthood. Here is another nonexhaustive list of many current attributes of the ever-shaping student ministry leader.

TEACHABLE

Effective student ministry leaders are teachable. While this statement may seem simple, it's extremely accurate. Leaders are learners, and student ministry doesn't have the latitude to offer any exceptions to this rule. The student ministry leaders who are really making an impact are the ones who are seeking to learn from other effective leaders, as well as from the culture itself. These leaders understand that networking is important not just to help your career in ministry, but also to catch a glimpse of something that is catching the attention of the culture. They are finding ways to leverage their influence with today's student culture, and not just going through the motions.

MORE SPECIALIZED

Student ministry leaders are becoming more specialized. There seem to be fewer broad positions found in churches today. This could be in part to the fact that smaller churches are shutting down in droves as people navigate to larger churches.⁸ These larger churches tend to have a more contemporary worship style and are less likely to have a position for a student leader that is a catchall for many youth ages. Many churches are also realizing that keeping a sixth-grade student and a twelfth-grade student in the same room for worship and instruction can be beyond challenging. With the split of middle school and high school ministries often comes the more specialized hiring of leaders to head up each of those specific ministries. So while the older model may have found student pastors who also have a passion for speaking to the XYZ Senior Group, this new breed of leader is much more specialized and laser focused to their specific group.

OFTEN BI-VOCATIONAL

Many student leaders are still bi-vocational. Student ministry leaders aren't always the third hire on staff any longer. As churches grow, they are looking for roles that may fit their growth needs and they may not have an immediate need for a specialized position for student ministry. Many leaders found in this role are found through their volunteer status or came on at the church in a part-time role that expanded as the church continues to grow. As mentioned before, as the church abandons the "catch all" position that student pastors once held, they are quicker to hire several part-time positions before hiring one full time.

KINGDOM-MINDED AND MISSIONAL

Student ministry leaders are becoming more kingdom-minded and missional in their approaches. When the medium becomes the message, eventually you lose a generation's attention when that medium changes. For many years we have experienced this in our churches in the music medium. Music is not headed toward extinction, although its forms (records, tapes, CDs, downloads) continually change, as do its styles. A generation worships a certain style of music instead of the reason that music had a huge impact in the first place—its message. In other words, we make a decision on whether we like the music (our preference), not on what it does or does not accomplish (its message). Student leaders should focus more on the message and less on style. Wise student

ministry leaders are careful to understand that the goal isn't to entertain a student (and to keep up with the current music trend), but to disciple a student. Discipleship supersedes cultural styles. The students today are looking for raw, real truth.⁹ They thrive when they are challenged and are not looking for anything that would even appear fake or insincere. They aren't concerned with petty arguments or silly disagreements.

While styles in which we convey our messages can change, the message never changes. Focus on the most important part of the great need and teach students to love Jesus more—not their style of worship.

EQUIP PARENTS

Student ministry leaders excel when they equip parents. One survey found that 61 percent of students value family in their lives.¹⁰ There is a certain expectation that they have when they see their student ministry leader share the gospel—but when students witness their parents telling others about Jesus it shapes them considerably more than the impact that the leaders may have. Effective student ministry leaders are learning that to have a greater impact in the lives of students, they need to have a greater influence in the lives of parents.

While student ministry in the past may have been a situation where a parent dropped his or her child off in hopes that the leader will “fix” them and lead them spiritually, the best thing we can do for that parent is help the mother or father embrace and understand that a parent has the biggest impact on the life of the son and daughter.

Student ministry leaders are spending large amounts of time and resources in more effectively reaching parents through training, equipping, and sometimes simply informing parents as to cultural trends they may be unaware of. This has quickly become an irreplaceable part of effective ministry. There is no substitute for a healthy ministry to parents.

A WIDENING GAP AMONG MINISTRY LEADERS

The final attribute of student ministry leaders deserves special mention. It is this: The gap of differences between student ministries is getting wider. Although many churches are facing declining attendance or actually closing their doors, many new churches are starting, seemingly taking their places. Fewer traditional churches are embracing change and new churches are open-

ing with a new dynamic that isn't restricted by tradition. As such, the gap between these churches is getting wider, not narrower.

The role of student ministry leaders in each of these churches is looking just as dissimilar. In many newer churches, the style of ministry is one that more accurately reflects the student culture than the traditional church does. As such, these churches have a much higher number of students connecting in the primary worship service—and can have a more difficult time helping students see the value of a worship service designed just for them. Often the service designed for students in new churches is not too unlike the primary worship service. The traditional church struggles with almost the exact opposite problem. Students connect much easier in the student worship time and struggle to find value in the primary worship service of the church. The dynamic of new churches means the values that are placed with each of these student ministry leaders is changing drastically as a result of their own context.

Gone are the days of free pizza. Students don't just show up with the promise of a T-shirt or triangle-shaped food. There is far too much competing for their attention, and plenty of other people willing to buy it. The fact is, intentionality is key when leading students to engage with the group.

As student ministry leaders, we need to be aware of the shape of our culture and be willing to embrace new means of reaching students. We need to take whatever steps are necessary to reach students. Because it's not just attendance that's at stake; it's the very gospel saturation of this culture itself.

NOTES

1. Patrick Gillen, student pastor to high school at Prince Avenue Baptist Church in Athens, Georgia. Personal interview conducted on June 29, 2014.
2. Alex Murashko, "Modern Youth Ministry a '50-Year Failed Experiment,' Say Pastors," *The Christian Post*, July 28, 2011.
3. Barry Shettel retired in 2009 from Prince Avenue Baptist Church in Athens, Georgia.
4. As of this writing, Deana Dickerson is the middle school director at Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, California.
5. Deana Dickerson; all comments are from an email response, June 2, 2014.
6. Ed Stetzer, "Dropout and Disciples: "How Many Students are Really Leaving the Church?" The Exchange, a blog at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/may/dropouts-and-disciples-how-many-students-are-really-leaving.html>.

7. See Thomas G. Bandy, “Clergy Anger & the Urgency of a True Spiritual Life,” at <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4253/clergy-anger-the-urgency-of-a-true-spiritual-life>.
8. “Lifeway Research Finds Reason Adults Switch Churches,” December 2006 survey by Lifeway Research; <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-church-switchers-move-to-larger-more-contemporary-church>.
9. Polly House, “Millennials: Hard Questions Need Answers,” Facts & Trends, April 1, 2013; <http://factsandtrends.net/2013/04/01/millennials-hard-questions-need-answers>.
10. Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 74; as cited in Jess Rainer, “Family Topped List, April 2, 2013 at <http://factsandtrends.net>.