

*The following is a report on the practical applications of **Mark DeVries'** [Sustainable Youth Ministry](#), (2008). In our Presbytery Resource Center.*

You've got a passion to help young people grow spiritually, lots of creative ministry ideas, fun programs and events, and cutting-edge technology. Yet your church's youth ministry is still failing to attract many students, and your latest in a string of youth [pastors](#) has resigned. Sound familiar? If so, don't despair. It *is* possible to build a lasting youth ministry that has a powerful impact on the lives of many students – if you lay down the right foundation first. Here's how you can build a youth ministry that's strong enough to last:

**Don't push the "easy button."** There are no easy answers or quick fixes that will lead to a strong youth ministry. Be willing to put in lots of effort over a sustained period of time to invest in your church's youth ministry for the long haul.

**Think clearly about what your ministry needs.** Too often, youth ministry job postings are either too vague or filled with unrealistic expectations. Ask God to help you understand and communicate the ministry's real needs well.

**Help make a superstar instead of looking for one to come to you.** Rather than spending time trying to recruit a youth pastor with superstar qualities (like charisma, compassion, and creativity), build the kind of ministry infrastructure that will help any moderately gifted youth pastor thrive in his or her role.

**Look at your system before your content.** While the content of your youth ministry is important, it can't be delivered properly if your ministry's system is flawed. Focus on the system first: whether staff members trust each other, whether staff and volunteers are working with clear expectations, whether the ways people typically get things done in the ministry are productive, etc. Keep in mind that systemic changes must be built deliberately over a course of years for even the best content to reach students well.

**Develop key documents.** Create a directory of students, another directory of staff and volunteers, and a final directory of people who have visited your youth ministry during the past two to three years. Be sure to update these directories annually. Map out the ministry's annual events on a calendar. Write job descriptions that clearly outline the scope of staff and volunteer position responsibilities. Then give people annual reviews and be willing to revise their job descriptions if necessary. Build a master recruiting list by deciding how many volunteers the ministry needs for the coming year and who the most likely prospects are to call. Create a curriculum template – a game plan of how the ministry's teachings will be structured for the next six or seven years. Craft a mission statement for the ministry. List measurable goals to aim to achieve over three years. Write a statement of values. Develop an organizational chart for the ministry.

**Change the vision.** The best time to consider a new initiative or trajectory in youth ministry is just before the momentum of the current focus has peaked. Every five years or so, bring key stakeholders together to cast a fresh vision for the ministry. Dream boldly and ask God to breathe new life into the ministry.

**Change the culture.** If the culture of your youth ministry isn't healthy, change it before it changes the people working within it. First work to give stakeholders visible evidence that something good is actually happening in the ministry. Make one small change after another and

trust that, slowly but surely, bigger changes will result. Ask God to help you avoid anxiety and be joyful despite the problems around you. Your attitudes will help other people remain positive. Use stories and metaphors to affirm the progress you see and to encourage others to notice God at work in the ministry. Use rituals, traditions, signs, and symbols to cultivate a positive sense of community identity within the ministry.

**Search with the right goal in mind.** When searching for the next youth pastor, focus on finding someone who can steward a vision much larger than himself or herself while serving at your church. Put the right system in place before looking for the right person to hire. Remember that the youth pastor and all other staff and volunteers are really just interim workers. What's most important is the ministry's impact on students' lives, which will continue into the future whether or not the people who are currently working in your ministry are still there.

**Hire wisely.** Hire a youth pastor who naturally likes to do the tasks the job requires. Clearly communicate the direction in which the ministry is heading so your next youth pastor will help take it there instead of in another direction. Emphasize two basic goals: growing the youth group to reach more students, and creating a ministry that the students will enjoy. Pay your new youth pastor as well as you can, because he or she is most likely to stay if fairly compensated. Define what "success" will look like the youth pastor can understand your expectations well.

**Encourage emotional health.** Work to stay emotionally healthy yourself and help others who work with you in the youth ministry to do the same. Don't make your decisions on the basis of your feelings, which depend on changing circumstances and are unreliable. Base your decisions on biblical principles that remain the same no matter what your current circumstances. Instead of running from pain, find God at work in the middle of the pain and see what you can learn from it. Take responsibility for your own problems rather than blaming other people. Ask yourself these key questions: "Do I have a life outside ministry?", "Do I have an emotionally healthy schedule?", "How much do I know about what I don't know?", "Do I rule my tongue, or does it rule me?", "Whom do I take more seriously – God or myself", "What am I fighting about?", "What do I do after I fail?", "Can I say 'no' to people?", and "Am I burning out?"

**Manage your time well.** Every day, decide what your most important priorities will be, and focus on them. Keep in mind that the best results will likely come from activities like spending time with students, developing a volunteer team, and doing strategic planning. Be sure to build in enough time to reflect on what you're doing regularly and keep thinking and praying about how to best meet your goals. Give yourself enough time to rest, as well. When people approach you with a task that you'd like you to take on or a problem they'd like you to solve, write it down so you can remember it and figure out how best to manage it. Hold three different kinds of ministry meetings: daily meetings of just a few minutes at the beginning of each day to clarify priorities, weekly tactical meetings, and strategic meetings either every month or every quarter.

**Build a constellation of people.** Instead of relying on just one star (your youth pastor) to shine Christ's light into the lives of your students, develop a constellation of many stars (staff members and volunteers) willing to invest their time and energy into students' lives. Make sure that the adults are connected to each other as well as to the students, with everyone working together to shine as brightly as possible. Start recruiting adults at least six months before a new year of youth group ministry. Write down the ministry's needs to help you figure out how many volunteers you'll need for the coming year. Develop a pool of potential recruits – including a name of a potential volunteer beside each open position – and diligently make phone calls until you find the people you need. Once you have the volunteers, regularly communicate with them.

Give them job descriptions, behavioral covenants, and an accountability structure. Affirm and encourage them regularly by showing your appreciation in creative ways (giving them gift cards, inviting them to the pastor's home for dinner, etc.). Help volunteers build friendships with each other, and encourage them to remain committed to volunteering with the youth ministry for at least several years so they can see growth occur in students' lives. Delegate responsibility to key volunteers by building a culture of apprenticeship. Give new volunteers a thorough orientation, regularly check in with all your volunteers, and celebrate the good work that your volunteers are doing.

**Shift the focus from programs to friendships.** If your youth ministry doesn't give students the chance to be with the kind of friends they want, the students won't stick around to participate in the ministry's programs – no matter how fun or creative they are. Studies have shown that what matters most to students is finding a welcoming environment where they can be themselves and build quality friendships. Do all you can to help them feel wanted, accepted, and connected in your youth group.

**Learn the unspoken rules of church politics.** Market your youth ministry internally by constantly getting the word out about what you're accomplishing there so church leaders and parents will understand the ministry's importance. Keep your supervisor fully informed about what's going on in the ministry. Before making any significant change, listen to people's concerns and adjust your plans as necessary. When you're criticized, don't react defensively. Instead, learn from the criticism and work with your critics to find creative solutions to problems.

**Don't wander down rabbit trails.** Avoid pursuing activities that distract you from focusing properly on the ministry's core vision. Don't worry about trying to design your youth group like a successful group at another church, buying more technology, adding more events to your calendar, etc. if it won't directly help your ministry fulfill its unique vision.

**Scale brick walls.** Work to overcome challenges when you encounter them. Focus on one issue at a time. Have your team members share responsibility. Hold regular meetings. Set aside time regularly for strategic thinking. Set expectations for problems to be solved gradually over the course of years instead of pursuing futile quick fixes. Avoid anxiety and remain focused on working on strategic plans.

## SUSTAINABLE YOUTH MINISTRY

Why most youth ministry doesn't last  
and what your church can do about it



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