

One Youth Pastor's Journey

Steve,

I have been in youth ministry now for ten years and, as many other youth leaders, have had a knot in my stomach concerning whether or not I was making a lasting impact. I, like others, had the feeling that youth ministry, as it was, wasn't preparing or impacting students for a lifetime. As I would attend conferences, retreats, events, and trainings, I experienced a growing discontent. I was tempted to think, "You've got to be kidding me! *This* is the best we have to offer these students?" Indeed, some of the camps and conferences I attended seemed geared to entertain and distract students rather than to disciple and transform. My heart grew heavier as I witnessed more of the "middle class consumer mentality" being passed on to the upcoming generation.

I vividly remember going to a winter retreat in Gatlinburg during this period. This was a preplanned retreat with a big name band and speaker. I can remember about halfway through the event having the distinct impression that I was at a concert produced by MTV rather than at a worship event. Now please, understand, I love great music and having fun and cracking jokes and the idea of something being done with excellence and relevance. But I just could not shake the feeling that we were being duped and baby fed shallow belief. I could not have articulated this at the time—yet the feeling remained nonetheless.

My discontent seemed to grow as I felt pressure to compete and "take the ministry to the next level." There would be meetings with pastors and parents urging for bigger events, events that were "outside the box." Again, please understand that I don't have any problems with creative events but to make them the sum of youth ministry is a giant leap in the wrong direction. I became even more aggravated as I attended youth ministry network meetings. The egos and agendas displayed there only added to the angst I was feeling despite God's call. I heard attitudes voiced about parents, discipleship, and what was valuable in youth ministry that I just didn't agree with. Some youth guys even seemed to see parents as adversaries to discipling students.

When I began ministering at my current church, I felt that God was going to allow me to stay and, therefore, see some fruit from ministry. Events in my family's life seemed to confirm this belief. This church was a growing church, a healthy church, and a place where my family and I could be used. In the back of my mind, I still had reservations about the current paradigms of youth ministry, but I could not articulate those concerns. I had settled in my own mind the question of God's call on my life to impact students, in whatever way, shape, or form I could. I spent two years here doing standard youth ministry: relationships, discipleship, and event planning.

As I began that second two years, my attitudes about ministry began changing. As I read and studied books like Proverbs and Deuteronomy, I found a disconnect between the kind of discipleship I was doing and the discipleship in the Old Testament—which was the heritage of the discipleship of Jesus. I wondered what Jesus' own discipleship was like and what kind of role Joseph played in the process. I looked again at the families that were represented in my youth ministry. In spite of what our ministry was doing, there were some families that seemed to match up with what I was seeing biblically. But these were the exception rather than the rule. These seemingly innocuous, theological questions culminated into one basic question: WHAT SHOULD YOUTH MINISTRY LOOK LIKE FROM A BIBLICAL POINT OF VIEW? Frustratingly, I was again having trouble articulating the answer.

Then God used *reThink* to put into words almost ten years of frustration and the answer to my discontent with youth ministry as a whole. Parenting (for parents, guardians, and grandparents) equals discipleship in a student's life. You articulated exactly what I had been feeling for years, but couldn't quite verbalize.

During the last semester, in our youth ministry, we have been focusing on families. Our Wednesday night worship time has focused on teaching students how to relate to their parents and to their families. Our entire ministry has taken on this focus: we introduced verses from Proverbs for our Scripture memory emphasis and are starting the InQuest study on *Proverbs* this coming week. Last weekend our Winter Retreat focused on involving parents in the discipleship of their students. Pray for us as we continue that process of supporting parents as they reclaim that role and teaching students that their parents are their primary spiritual influence. Pray for some of our students who come from broken homes and are in essence the only witness to Christ in their homes. Pray that God will transform parents to be the spiritual leaders that Christ has called them to be. As a part of the culmination of this past weekend, I was able to speak to parents about what their child needs from them during both our worship services and also host a parents/students luncheon after those worship services and see many of our families make commitments to one another to fulfill their biblical roles. I'm so excited about what God is doing here and in part I wanted to thank you and let you know that.

Thanks for your ear and your prayers. I wanted to encourage you and share my own story about where God has brought my ministry and our church. I'm really looking forward to the days ahead.

Dennis Tinsley

Just a Youth Pastor that wants to see God do some awesome stuff