



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

09

The Youth Worker's
Relationship Within the
Body of Christ

Youth Ministry Training
Lesson Nine: The Youth Workers Relationship within the Body of Christ

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Hopes and Expectations
- The Ones You Love
- Participating in the Body of Christ
- Alongsideness—Unity in the Body

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Consider and reflect on the nature of the church relationships they currently participate in
- Consider their understanding of healthy relationships as single or married youth workers
- Understand and commit themselves to developing a healthy approach to the relationships that they are a part of within the congregation
- Identify and consider ways of expanding their relationships

Introduction

This session explores the multiplicity of relationships encountered by youth workers within the body of Christ. It includes considering the role of youth worker as a model, example, bridge builder, and reconciler in their relationships with others within the church. The need for youth workers to maintain healthy relationships with their own families, the congregations they serve and others in ministry is vitally important

Lesson Body

Hopes and Expectations

The reality of youth ministry varies widely depending on circumstances: For example, are you paid? Do you work full-time for the church? Are you a volunteer in leadership? Do you work part time for the church? Do you work with a team, or are you on your own? Are you single or married, male or female? No matter what your circumstances, however, the question of dealing with expectations within the body of Christ can be a crucial one. What do you expect of your church?

- Advocacy for justice?
- Service to the poor?
- Proclamation of hope?
- Support for ministry?
- Transportation for young people?
- The attendance of other volunteer leaders?
- Young people who will actively participate in activities?
- Financial backing and a budget to work with?

And what does your church expect of you?

- Perfection?
- Modeling faith?
- Being a voice for justice and hope?
- Absolute Integrity?
- ALL of your Time; Energy; Commitment; Enthusiasm; and Longevity?

The reality for many of us is that we usually have very high hopes for our churches and our ministries, and they often have high hopes for us. Our cultures will also impact upon our expectations. In some cultures, it is likely that hospitality, open homes, intense amounts of time and participation in one another's lives is both permissible and normal. In other cultures, it is more likely that there will be rigidly scheduled times, with limitations set on seeing one another and participating in one another's lives as a church family or youth group. Depending on where you start from you may well have different questions to address when thinking about your relationship within the body of Christ.

For many youth workers, there is never enough time in the week to do all that they would dream of doing. There is also the added reality that trying to do all that the church asks, (and all that they don't ask for, but seem to expect), can create even more pressure. Then there is the vision and calling that the youth workers have for their own lives. The question of balance then becomes a critical one for youth workers to consider.

It is certainly true that deeply embedded within the idea of ministry is the notion of sacrifice, but what does that mean in our cultures? How does 'sacrifice' (which at times has led to high-impact, short term ministry) mesh with the evidence that young people crave stable, long-term relationships in order to understand their faith? How does the idea of sacrifice tie in with the biblical command uttered by Jesus to love God and love others as yourself? In Western culture the challenge includes balancing an appropriate amount of personal time in relation to the time spent with others, particularly youth. In some cultures, the challenge relating to balance includes seeking an appropriate amount of personal time in relation to the time spent with others, particularly youth. Other cultures view the relational balance differently, often focusing on the nature of the relationship maintaining genuine hospitality or maintaining one's "honor" (or "face") in the midst of relationships. Nevertheless, we need a sound sense of our personal identity in the midst of cultural expectations.

While it is an important idea, the notion of loving yourself, taken to an extreme, can certainly lead into selfishness and self-focus, on the other hand, embedded in the idea of loving yourself well is that of discipline. Truly loving oneself means being willing to

- Reflect honestly on your life and practice,
- Think holistically about your way of living
- Think about who you are, what you do and why you do what you do
- Loving others and being outward looking
- Living well within creation

If it is true that we must lead lives that demonstrate Godliness, holiness and balance, how is this possible? How can we help juggle our hopes for holistic lives with the demands placed upon us by the expectations of our congregations? Here are some suggestions gleaned from people whose lives are devoted to thinking about leadership:

1. *Focus on Christ:* prayer, scripture reading, developing habits of spiritual living
2. *Clarify expectations:* sit down with your church leadership and the team you work with and consider their explicit and implicit expectations for your leadership
3. *Acknowledge tensions:* be honest about the areas where you find it most difficult (e.g. your church leadership/church expects numerical growth in the youth group, but you are investing in a small number as part of developing discipleship)
4. *Build in seasons of time and rest:* look at the long-term view of your ministry. Have you built in 'Sabbath rest'; time dedicated to retreat? Have you built in time for rest? Are you able to take a day away from 'ministry' and be with friends?
5. *Give and receive:* recognize that as you give of yourself you must also find places or people from whom to receive. Be willing to be gracious in receiving.
6. *Surround yourself with strong people, build a team:* resist being a 'one-person-show'. Don't be afraid of other people who are better than you and can propel your ministry in other directions. Remember that Jesus spend as much time with the disciples as the multitudes. Resist being the only one who can lead, or make decisions, or set direction, instead, deliberately cultivate key others who are equally strong as you. You will still shine.
7. *Care for 'the weak':* be a person who advocates for those who are different from yourself. Exercise compassion, learn the art of empathy.
8. *Develop Accountability and find a mentor:* find someone to be held accountable to, for your thoughts, time, actions and ministry. Find someone more experienced than you to mentor you and develop you. Deliberately seek someone out who will ask good questions of your ministry. Recognize that working alongside people in need can be draining. Build in systems of support; people who you can share in confidence with. Develop systems of support that are outside of your local church.
9. *Put others first:* think of those you love and put them first. If your friends never see you, or family begin to ask questions of your time, remember that people are always more important than programs. Attend carefully to the needs of those who love you.
10. *Live holistically:* take a lesson from Jesus and spend time alone. Take care of your body—with food and sleep, exercise and prayer. Remember that we are created to be co-creators with God, find time to celebrate, laugh as well as cry. In general, seek to live a whole life before God. Love the world and learn to care for the creation you are a part of.

11. *Learn to say no*: realize that it is important not to say yes to every request. Learn the difference between the truly urgent and the seemingly urgent. Be available but remember that we need to empower people we serve to develop and grow into interdependent not dependent human beings.
12. *Invest in relationships*: it is vital to realize that youth ministry takes place over time and that the fruit of the relationships may not be immediately evident, but the importance of allowing genuine relationships to exist between you and other leaders, young people and your family will be a part of the transformation that God brings about when people are in relationships with each other.

The Ones You Love

In addition to the suggestions presented there are other dynamics that may impact the life of leaders. The way you live your life as a single leader or married leader is significant. You will be perceived as a role model for the young people you serve. Caring for yourself, accepting yourself, and learning to love yourself is vital. Being someone who cherishes and nurtures your relationship with God and with those you love will be one of the most significant things you do. This is because we are created to be in relationships, mirroring the trinity, who exists in a community of love.

Regardless of whether or not you are single or married, ensuring that you work well with other leaders is important. Developing appropriate relationships with your team-workers, people in your church, and expanding your circle of friends takes time and energy. It is important that you discipline your life to do this.

Single in leadership

As an unmarried leader, your time is often perceived by others as less full/important and more flexible, and your own temptation can be to pour all time, energy and enthusiasm into the youth you serve. There are enormous questions to ask here, however:

Do you have relationships with people of your own age and maturity? Do you cultivate these relationships? Do you love others and give your life to others in mutual relationships?

It is critical for single youth workers to develop healthy relationships with people who can give them support and love at a mature level. Your time is, perhaps, slightly more flexible, but you must discipline yourself to create the space for you to have time to nurture your relationship with God and others. You also must be careful to ensure that your relationships with young people are not merely related to enhancing your self-esteem or creating a false sense of community and support. It is important as a single person to deal in healthy ways with your sexuality, the need for love, ways of sharing and shaping time and cultivating relationships that will help you to grow and be transformed. Incidentally, the last two sentences are equally true for married people.

Married in leadership

As married leaders, the questions shift again: to what extent does your family become involved in your calling and ministry? Is your husband or wife automatically involved? How do you discipline your time? How do you ensure that you have the time and energy for your blood family as well as your Christ-family? Certainly, there is often an assumption of ‘two-for-the-price-of-one’ in church settings, and while there is some truth to that (it is impossible to exclude the family) there is also an important reality that time devoted to being a wife or mother, husband or father is also important. What are the ways you nurture a positive relationship with your family?

Your time may be slightly more rigid; however, it will be important to strive for balance. Many marriages have been sacrificed on the altar of a youth worker’s inability to say ‘no’. You also must be careful to ensure that your relationships with young people are not merely related to enhancing your self-esteem or creating a false sense of community and support. It is important as a married person to deal in healthy ways with your sexuality, the need for love, ways of sharing and shaping time and cultivating relationships that will help you to grow and be transformed. [Incidentally, the last two sentences are equally true for single people.]

Protecting and nurturing your marriage while in youth ministry

If you are married you also must pay time and attention to your marriage. Does your spouse understand the demands of your ministry? Do you share a vision of your marriage that touches on time, money and life-style? Do you have an open-house policy? Do you spend time together privately, working on communicating and loving each other? Do you deliberately set times when you are able to reconnect with each other? Listening to one another and reflecting deeply on one another’s hopes and expectations of marriage and ministry will be vital.

The role of power and intimacy must be considered. Those in youth ministry often will be seen as having authority and power in a relationship with young people and other leaders. It is vital that youth workers (married or single) reflect carefully on their use of time and their energy. Likewise, caring for young people, sometimes vulnerable, always needing to be nurtured and cared for can lead to relationships that seem intimate and then can lead to inappropriate relationships. Taking heed, guarding time, being ruthlessly honest, allowing accountability partnerships to develop are all critical. If married, listening and responding to the concerns of your spouse can be vital, and allowing other people’s instincts to guide you can be extremely important. If single, it is vitally important to have people you are accountable to, and listen to their instincts. It is sometimes difficult to perceive the danger if we are too close to it.

Participating in the Body of Christ

The gap between our expectation of ourselves and the body of Christ we are a part of and the realities that we experience can create tension and stress unless it is acknowledged and accepted. It is important to consider the ‘hard’ issues of finance, time allocation, job descriptions, budgets and so on, and the more ‘soft’ expectations of hopes for young people, spiritual development, relationship building and so on. Although all of these areas are worth exploring (maybe in a different lesson) in this session we are going to consider our expectations of our own participation as youth workers and the lives we lead in several key areas.

The question of being a participant in the life of the congregation you serve is important. This speaks to a particular understanding of ministry: either ministry ‘from above’ or ministry ‘from within/below.’ In the church, there has historically been some debate. Is the minister one of the congregation or above the congregation, leading from a different level/plain? As noted before, the idea of incarnational-ministry has been vital in the understanding of ministry over the last years. The leader ministers from within, alongside and as one of the congregation. The minister, in this view, is as likely to have weaknesses and needs as any other member of the congregation, and is considered a participant first, leader second.

The importance placed upon this view is derived from scripture. Reflecting again on Philippians 2, the model that Jesus Christ offers is one of coming among us, becoming flesh, being one of and with the people—even though He was entitled to much more, He willingly chose to be clothed in human flesh and die our death. The idea of the incarnation serves as a model then of our ministry. If that is true then in the body of Christ we are both a participant and leader, one who enters into the experience of the local body of Christ and one who helps shape it.

Whatever else is true, it seems that to be a participant in the body of Christ expressed locally in your congregation, will mean several things.

You will:

1. Be involved in the local church as she participates in what God is doing in a local area or setting
2. Be called to love people and be loved by them
3. Be part of the mission of God in the world and try and see how God is at work around you
4. Take part in the disciplines and practices of the local church
5. Take part in the projects of the local church
6. Participate in the worship gatherings of the local church
7. Share in the Eucharist of the local church
8. Disciple and be discipled within the local church
9. Seek to share in the vision of the local church
10. Support the leaders and other members of the local church
11. Recognize that you are part of the body of Christ formed around the world, reflecting Jesus to the world.

That's quite a lot! Alongside this list—which is true for all Christian believers throughout time and space—it is important to realize though that it can be difficult for leaders to simply participate.

It is vital to share in the life of the congregation as a youth worker. You must. This takes discipline. It takes deliberately recognizing yourself as a servant and participant first. It means empowering others to share in the responsibility for the tasks you find hard to leave behind. It means sitting amongst the congregation and entering into worship. The importance of being an authentic participant is vital for your ministry and your health. If you cannot worship alongside your sisters and brothers in Christ, then you must reflect again on your role within the church and how you can be transformed into a participant in the community as a worshipper as well as a 'professional' or a 'worker.'

Togetherness—Unity in the Body

You are not alone! Though at points it is tempting to be like Elijah—in 1 Kings 19: 9-18—the reality is that there are other ministers in the congregation you serve. Spending time, sharing vision, praying together, developing systems of accountability, honing one another's skills, listening to each other are all vitally important as you serve God. Not being afraid of other people's gifts and strengths is important—God calls all of His people to serve and equips them—and the place you are called to serve deserves people who are of one mind. Please don't read that as having no arguments or always being clones! Normalizing conflict is vital in the church, and learning ways to be reconciled is essential. Read Acts for the rest of the story about leadership! It is tough, and demands thought, prayer, creativity and perseverance. The one-mindedness of the Epistle is to have the goal and focus of Christ who will be called Lord and before whom every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue confess.

Likewise, the history of the Christian church has recently been marred by a sense of mistrust and disunity, brokenness, you might say. In terms of healthy ministry relationships, however, Jesus' prayer for unity compels us to look to other local congregational leaders, to meet and talk and share and pray with others nearby who also long for Christ to be glorified. Until all the people locally are Christians there is no need for a sense of competitiveness, rather, there is every need for a sense of common ministry. Learning from others as well as teaching them, sharing with others as well as listening to them are all vital in the Kingdom sense of being the body of Christ.

If we allow ourselves to focus first on the Kingdom of God and second on what unites us, centering our conversations on Jesus and working together for His sake, then we are more likely to be able to meet and pray, share and worship alongside one another. Certainly, there are differences. Again, thinking biblically about Paul's descriptions of the body there is a little toe and an eyelash to be considered, but in humility regarding others as better than oneself, it may be that we can work together in unity not only within our own local expression of the body of Christ, but also with others who are united in the vision of seeing Jesus as Lord of all.

Application

Take time to write a ministry statement that responds to these questions:

- What are your hopes and expectations of your ministry? Do they differ from your church's expectations and hopes? How can you gain clarity?
- How can you improve in one area of relationship (your church, other ministers, other leaders, with your loved ones)?
- Who can you identify as a mentor or co-leader? What steps can you take to approach them for support?

Identify at least three people in your life that provide healthy relationships beyond the life of the church. Do you have accountability partners?

If married discuss with your spouse the church's expectations for the both of you, do you agree?

Make a list of activities in the church where you can participate apart from youth ministry. Which ones provide both support and fellowship?

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Think about how your lifestyle as a youth worker impacts the people around you. Would you describe yourself as living a balanced life?

If single, share the issues that are most critical in developing healthy relationships with non-youth.

If married, share the issues that are most critical in developing healthy relationships with your spouse.

Is it possible to be a leader and a participant?

Can you share in the life of the church as a youth worker but also just as a member?



Nazarene Youth International

