

CHAPTER 1

Beyond the Status Quo: Defining Student Leadership

I always thought that greenhouses were just places where you protected plants until I visited some greenhouses owned by a friend of mine in Florida. I had assumed they were emergency hospitals, not birthing rooms. I had envisioned people checking in their plants so they could be revived or patched up and then given back until the process needed to be repeated.

Unfortunately, I think this has become our perspective about church youth ministries. Students are checked in with the youth doctors (by this, I mean leaders) with the hope that by the time they are picked up, they have been fixed. Christian homes are often viewed in a similar fashion. We reason that if we can just keep them protected from evil so they don't do anything really bad, then we have done our job.

But greenhouses are more than hospitals or isolation chambers. Greenhouses are places of nurturing, strengthening, and preparing these tender plants we call *students* for a productive life. There are some critical care duties performed in greenhouses and they are also places of protection, but all this is done with the idea of preparing the plants to leave, grow, and reproduce.

Our churches and our families must work together with a unified biblical strategy to cultivate students of influence. The teen years are not a “holding pattern,” but should be a time of utilizing the power of youth. We are not preparing them to be leaders in the future; we are preparing them now for this moment. Being salt and light is not a post-graduate concept.

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There has been a great deal of discussion and debate over the mass exodus of students from the church following high school. Recently, I was discussing this with a group of youth pastors and I made the statement, “You cannot lose what you never truly had.” Many of those whom we say we are losing were never committed or connected; they just attended.

In an interview with Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (CPYU), Tim Clydesdale, author of *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School*, said, “Those who “walked away” from their faith during college made the decision to do so long before their college years—they just waited for the freedom of college to enact that choice.” He goes on to say, “Sadly, most youth ministries are long on fun and fluff and short on listening and thoughtful engagement. The former produces a million paper boats; the latter produces a handful of seaworthy ships.”¹ In order to change this, we must have a plan to equip students to deal with current pressures and pressures to come in the future.

This will not take place in emergency youth hospitals and isolation chambers; it will take place in the trenches. It seems that many of the articles on student ministry are addressing the failure to stabilize students but only a few are addressing the answer. There appears to be some consensus (at least in print) as to the way to change the paradigm of youth ministry. Now we need to make a commitment to transfer these changes from the printed page to life’s arena.

Some of the basic ideas for this process should not be new to us as they arise from long-standing biblical mandates. But perhaps our ministries have been program-driven so long that these ideas appear to

be revolutionary. They definitely will be if we make the commitment to implement them at any cost.

BIG PICTURE MINISTRY

- * Reaching students with the Gospel and cultivating them into genuine disciples.
- * Teaching students the current “hot topics” while simultaneously rooting them in biblical doctrine and principles.
- * Having multiple adults involved in a student’s life with true life-on-life ministry. This means youth leaders and parents working together.
- * Teaching students to feed themselves spiritually, with the realization that it is a personal responsibility.
- * Having some form of accountability for every student. This is not a legalistic checklist that will make them spiritual or keep them from evil, but it is a way of helping them navigate through the minefield of life.

Recently, I was with a group of youth pastors for a brainstorming session concerning student ministry. They were divided into four small groups and the question was asked, “What do you think the top ten goals of youth ministry should be?” After lengthy and lively discussions in all four groups, they shared their decisions. Here are the lists of two of the groups.

Group 1

- * All students reading the Bible every day
- * Honesty with God in prayer
- * Students honoring God
- * Students being godly leaders who impact their world
- * Students proactively sharing their faith
- * Students being moved to a ministry mindset of servanthood
- * Students being equipped to share the Gospel
- * Establishing accountability in a personal small group



Group 2:

- * Students sharing the Gospel
- * Clear partnership with parents
- * Students experiencing Scripture
- * Students understanding their spiritual gifts
- * Godly adult examples in every small group
- * Students with a hunger for the Word
- * Students with a biblical worldview
- * Students who are servants
- * Students who are wave-makers in the culture
- * Accountability
- * Creating a missional viewpoint for global impact

If you are the kind of person who is a stickler for detail then you probably counted the two lists and noted that one “top ten list” had eight recommendations and the other had eleven. This does not mean one group was more proficient than the other; it is just a great illustration of how those of us in youth ministry have varied perspectives.

But what is even more obvious is that student leaders know and desire the right things for their youth ministries. The problem in the past was that many of the concepts they espoused in this discussion were not popular in the student ministry paradigm. Youth ministry has accepted too many of the post-modern tenets and consequently we have rendered ourselves less effective.

Let me say that I am excited about what I see and hear as I talk to youth pastors, youth leaders, and parents across this nation and from other countries. Some of the most vocal advocates for change are the “twenty-something’s” and “thirty-something’s.” These two groups are recent products of our youth ministries that did not fall through the cracks. They want to be at the point of the spear of change. They are

not afraid to question the status quo and to say it is time to approach student ministry with this new paradigm.

Another group of people I have found ready for change are parents. They are voicing their desire to work together with youth ministries and others to have the greatest influence on their teens. They are no longer content to stand on the sidelines and they are volunteering at incredible rates. They see the problems firsthand every day and realize it is going to take the entire body of Christ to reach this generation with the truth. Many of them are willing and able to impact their own teens plus expand their influence to other students within the youth ministry if they are given some biblical instruction.

The good news is that pastors, parents, youth leaders, and even students realize we have to adjust and want change. This is more than a cultural shift; it is an embracing of solid biblical principles that should be foundational for our lives and ministries. By observing the brainstorm lists, and through reading numerous articles and books on youth ministry, I would like to condense some re-occurring principles that are taking shape in ministries where biblical life-change is the goal.

INTENTIONAL LIFE-CHANGE MINISTRY MODEL

- * Teach solid biblical content, including doctrine, not just the current trends. For too long, doctrine has been viewed as too difficult for students but the reality is that they can “get it.”
- * Develop students to take responsibility for their own spiritual walk with Christ and realize the value of accountability. Leadership by example in this area is strategic.
- * Train adults to be godly leaders who do “life-on-life” discipleship. This will include defining an individual strategy for each student for his or her spiritual journey. While this may appear to be overwhelming and time-consuming, leaders are grasping the concept of preventative ministry rather than reactionary ministry.

- * Create partnerships between parents and youth ministry to prepare students for real life. The extreme viewpoints of student ministry being performed by parents only or church youth leaders only are being abandoned. Churches are embracing a “both/and” mindset and are rejecting the “either/or” philosophy.
- * Develop students with a biblical worldview who are culture-shapers and have a vision for global impact. A biblical worldview is more than just how you live every day; it is foundational to the Christian life. Discovering the moorings of one’s faith creates a strong platform for shaping culture.
- * Answer real-life questions with the truth of Scripture and demonstrate how this can be fleshed out in daily living. Students who know answers to the questions of “What?” “Why?” and “How?” are stronger in their faith.

I am not purporting that these are all-inclusive, but they definitely represent a transformation in direction.

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In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul not only gives us a great plan for world evangelization but his words also serve as a model for cultivating students of influence. Paul says, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (NASB95)

From Paul’s words I have extracted three concepts to provide a strategic template for cultivating students:

ENLIST – “entrust these to faithful men”

EQUIP – “who will be able”

ENGAGE – “to teach others”

Cultivating students of influence should be more than a maxim or mantra; it needs to be our passion. The biblical plan is about growth through multiplication, not just addition. It is not enough to reach students and just “hang on” to them until they graduate. We must be transforming them into culture-shapers and world-changers every step of the way. Our goal is to reproduce reproducers of the faith.

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ENLIST

For many years, Uncle Sam has been recruiting and enlisting for the armed services. The campaigns have used everything from posters with Uncle Sam’s over-exaggerated finger pointing outward saying, “I want you!” to the current commercials showing how elite this group of recruits will be. My point is that there is a plan for enlistment. As the culture has changed, the appeal has changed, but the cause has remained the same.

I think particularly for this generation it is imperative that we answer some of their questions right up front. The advertisements do just that in that they tell the audience what they will be doing, why they will do it, and what it will look like. They promote the concept of individualizing their training while being a part of something big. Not a bad pattern for us to mirror as we enlist students to the greatest cause in life.

What exactly are they enlisting to do and to be?

The commercials are sometimes flashy and make the work look glamorous. I am not suggesting we follow this lead. Too many young people have joined the ranks under false pretenses of what it means to be a disciple so I recommend we tell the truth about the cost of discipleship. They need to know that we are in a spiritual battle. Serving the Lord is the greatest thing in the entire world but not every day is fun.

At the same time, we do not need to back up our “gospel dump truck” and unload everything at the same time. I am glad God has allowed



me to discover His will over a multi-year period. If I had known as a teen everything I know now about God's plan for my life, I would have been scared to death. We need to introduce them to this adventure but not necessarily explain about all the charging rhinos.

One of the best ways to communicate our point is to show them the truth of commitment in our own lives. It is much easier for them to get the big picture if they can see an example. I have often wondered if more students would not step up and out for Christ if they saw more of us in leadership doing the same.

Is it worth it?

After speaking to a large group of students at a camp, several of them surrounded me with some very penetrating questions about committing their lives to Christ. Some of the questions were the normal ones you hear all the time, but then one young man looked me right in the eyes and asked, "Is it worth it?" The undivided attention of every student in the group turned toward me as they waited for my answer.

I already knew that my answer was going to be met with another question but I gave it anyway, "Emphatically yes! Yes, it is worth it!" His follow up question was, "Why?" and before I could answer he said, "I want to know how this works in your personal life." I am not going to give my entire speech here but I do want you to know that I was glad that this was not just another "Christian cliché" with me, but the passion of my heart.

If we are going to enlist students then they need to see our passion and that God has given a purpose to our life. This generation is attracted to a cause. They may not define the cause the exact way we do, but the good news is that God has an individual plan for each person and once we discover His purpose, then personalizing the plan is very viable.

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EQUIP


Equip them with truth

The process of equipping students involves more than having a program led by a personality. Both program and personality are important but they have to be guided by the principles of Scripture. Our plan for cultivating students of influence is based on teaching them the truth of God's Word. I am not suggesting a checklist of doctrinal and topical content but I am saying that having a biblical scope and sequence for our ministry communicates that we have given careful analysis to the only thing that is not a variable in their lives.

Students can grasp doctrine if we as leaders carefully prepare our studies and communicate clearly. A casual perusal of the subjects they study in high school today will reveal that they are accustomed to deep matters and content. I do not think doctrine has to be difficult or complicated. I believe students want to understand the foundations of their faith.

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Walt Mueller, the founder of Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, wrote in *Youth Worker Journal*, "Teach them how the authoritative Word speaks to every area of life, going to great lengths to speak God's truth on the matters to which they are deferring to the authority of their feelings."² Walt has struck at the heart of the matter: if they do not found their lives on the unchanging Word, their feelings will guide them. Students find themselves in a pluralistic, feelings-oriented society today.



Equip them for life

I was blessed when I was given the responsibility of leading a youth group in my local church with a great leadership team. We became a close-knit family and enjoyed spending time together in and out of ministry. We met on a regular basis to plan the ministry, including the lessons, the décor, promotions, activities, and outreach events.

In one of the very first meetings, we talked through every student in the group. We tried to identify where they were spiritually and what we thought their capacity for growth would be. Every meeting we would evaluate our “growth plan” and share about challenges or blessings. I admit that I did not fully understand the value of this at the time, but I have come to realize that this is truly the process of discipleship.

Discipleship is not “one size fits all,” so in order to meet every student where they are and move them forward in their faith, we must formulate a “growth plan” or strategy for each student. You may be thinking, “You do not know how many students I have in my ministry.” You are right. I do not know the number but I know that every one of them matters to God and that they all need to grow spiritually. The principles do not vacillate; however the process will be unique and personalized.

Obviously this is only going to take place if you reproduce yourself in other leaders. This is covered in more detail in another chapter but let me say that you cannot do this alone. Experience has shown me the average leader can only disciple five or six students effectively. Even then, ministry will be taking place at varying degrees. Those of us in leadership must work together to cultivate students of influence.

We must remember we are building a life, a complete life. This is not an assembly line where we simply attach our widget to the machine and then send it down the line to someone else. In his book *Christian Education*, Lawrence Richards says, “The “training” of a disciple focuses on making the disciple a complete person, a mature believer. As Jesus lived with and taught the Twelve, He was concerned about transformation: His goal was the nurture of life.”³

We are equipping them to live a life that will be pleasing to God. We need to give them tools to know how to make decisions based on the Word of God and how to be discerning when confronted with error. Often we simply give them a list to memorize rather than a grid to use in judging the difficult matters of life. Not every area of life is addressed with a “thus says the Lord,” but every area is covered by biblical principles that can be mined from the depth of God’s Word.

ENGAGE

If you have had any Christian education training, you probably read *The Seven Laws of the Teacher* by John Milton Gregory. One of the laws he addresses is the “Law of Expectations,” and while I might not totally agree with everything he says, I like this concept.

We have sold our students short. We look at them as though they are in a holding pattern of life and must wait for a later time to be productive and have influence. The world has imposed this philosophy on us and we have jumped on board a train to nowhere. The time for teens to have influence is now. Do not get the idea by the title of this book that cultivating students of influence is only about the future; it is about the present.

Engage students with adult leadership

Every student in your ministry should have a small group leader who is personally responsible for overseeing the mentoring or discipleship process in their life. I am not implying that they replace the parents; I am saying within the youth ministry everyone should be accounted for by an adult. The best case scenario is when the leader partners with the parents to minister to the teen. Some parents may be AWOL (absent without leave) but that should not be true of adult leadership in your youth ministry.

Engage students with parents

Many parents are deeply burdened for their children and want to be a part of their lives. One of the negatives of our society is that the present culture has made such a distinction between teens and adults, particularly parents, that this seems impossible. Just watch some of the commercials or sitcoms and you will see that the message is clear: “Parents are out of touch and teens do not want them involved in their lives.” I do not accept this faulty paradigm and know we can help re-engage teens with their parents.

We need to create forums where the parents and teens are together, not always separated. We need to keep the parents informed and involved with the student ministry through the meetings, activities,

and outreach. When we accept a position of leadership in a youth ministry, we need to be keenly aware that ministry to parents is included in that commitment.

When I am training youth leaders in local churches, I always encourage them to visit the homes of every student in their small group. There are several very valid reasons for this, such as gaining insight into the teen and connecting with his or her world. But one of the greatest benefits is to explain to the parents that you are an extension of their ministry or influence in the life of their own teen. If they have never really gotten involved in their teen's life, this is a great time to explain the team concept of parent and youth leader.

This is also a great opportunity for you to minister to the parents. Some may be unsaved, others uncommitted to walking with Christ, and some may be just trying to get by. Regardless of their condition, this could be a turning point for the entire family. While you are visiting, take the opportunity to explain what you will be doing in the youth ministry and what some of your goals are for their son or daughter. You will find that in most cases, the support level for your youth ministry will escalate following one of these meetings.

Engage students with students

You may be thinking, "Hey, they are already engaged with other students." You are right but sometimes it is with the wrong students or in wrong scenarios. We want to help construct a plan to expose them to a variety of opportunities to expand their vision and allow "iron to sharpen iron."

This process will take on many formats and can be implemented in multiple venues. Because most of these are addressed by other authors in other chapters, I will just list some of the potential ideas you might want to consider in your ministry:

- * Small group discipleship
- * Work groups
- * Short-term missions trips
- * Attending youth conferences

- * Evangelistic outreach
- * Community service projects
- * Discipleship of a younger believer
- * Student brainstorming and planning sessions

Engage students with the culture

It would be difficult to be a student in the present society and not be immersed in the culture. They are bombarded every day by the messages of a pluralistic worldview that promotes license without limits, tolerance without boundaries, rationalization without reality, and freedom without responsibility.

Our goal is to equip them in such a way that they can engage the culture, not as pawns on a chessboard, but as master chessmen. They

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need to understand the culture, but also be armed with the tools of biblical thinking that allow them to engage to influence, not be influenced. For too long, we have tried to protect them from the culture and it is time to engage them as culture-shapers.

Engage students with discipleship

I have already mentioned it but discipleship of every student must be our ultimate goal. Intentional life-change ministry will reject the hypothesis that it is enough to have faithful attendees or groupies. When the model for the ministry is discipleship, then every activity, program, idea, and goal will be judged by this grid and all of the ministry will be elevated to a new level.

I want to suggest that we establish a discipleship plan for every student. I also believe that as they grow in this process, they need to practice 2 Timothy 2:2 and begin to disciple others as well. A discipleship strategy for every teen should include the long-term goal of them reproducing reproducers as well. As they engage in discipleship, often clarity for their own life's purpose will unfold.

So what's next?

As you continue through this book, you are going to be exposed to some great content but you are also going to discover some practical steps to implement in your personal life and ministry. The next step will be to determine to embrace the new paradigm regardless of what anyone else does. It will be to make a commitment to a life-on-life ministry that will require a great deal of investment, but will result in life-change.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to reproduce reproducers according to 2 Timothy 2:2?
2. What are some of the ways I can feed myself spiritually?
3. Do you have someone who is holding you accountable for your spiritual growth?
4. If not, who are some people (both at the peer level and from those who are more spiritually mature) that you would consider asking for help? List them.
5. Have you personally made a commitment to grow spiritually and live for Christ?
6. List three areas that you are helping equip someone else to be a better Christian or witness?
7. What two things are you doing to engage in ministry?