



## Developing of Philosophy of Youth Ministry

by Carl Eliason and Audrey Duensing-Werner

### What Exactly is A Philosophy?

First, let us ask the question, "What exactly is a philosophy?" A philosophy defines who you are and where you are going. A philosophy can be one-dimensional and closed in its focus; it can be intentional or unintentional; it can be driven by unrelated agendas; it can be exclusive in nature; or it can be integrated and multi-dimensional.

The second question to ask is, "Why is it important to define your philosophy of youth ministry?" Or for that matter, "Why do we need to develop a philosophy of youth ministry in the first place?" The very simple answer to those questions could be, "If you do not know what you are shooting at, how will you know if you hit it?" In other words, if you do not have a central source to revisit whenever you develop or evaluate a ministry event, it will never be intentional.

A Youth Ministry Philosophy defines your value system and priorities. From your philosophical framework you set your vision, mission, goals, and objectives. Youth leaders who focus their ministry and know their mission (what they are shooting at) have a foundation helpful in making decisions and setting goals.

### Limited Philosophies

Everyone comes to youth ministry with his or her own philosophy. Your belief and experiences have shaped your philosophy, whether you know it or not! You bring that philosophy with you into any youth ministry setting. But unless your philosophy is both intentional and focused, it can lead to a ministry that is one dimensional. One-dimensional youth ministries emphasize one particular aspect or goal and leave little room for growth for those young people that may never fit into the one-dimensional box.

Examples of one-dimensional youth ministries include:

- \* Ya'll Come Now, Ya Hear (Program Only)
- \* We Are the World (Issue Driven with Mission Trips and Servant Events)
- \* The More the Merrier (Big Events, Gatherings, and Huge Crowds)
- \* Money! Money! Money! (Fundraisers)
- \* Tea For Two And Two For Tea (One on One)
- \* Country Club – The Youth Version (Only those that fit in)
- \* Harry/Harriet Charisma (Charismatic Leader Led)
- \* Gilligan's Island (Only working with *our* youth at *our* church with *our* events.)
- \* The Bible Will Do It (Focus on study without action.)

**Ya'll Come Now, Ya Hear**—a youth ministry philosophy based on the concept, "If you build it, they will come." Most activities are offered at a specific site, perhaps the church building, on a set date and time and only those who can make it, or will come, will ever get the opportunity to take part. This model grows even more unfocused if the



leader jumps from the next new program model, to the latest program model searching for the “magic bullet” that will answer the needs of the youth in the congregation.

**We Are the World**—a youth ministry philosophy designed around mission trips, servant events, service projects, and disaster relief efforts. The ministry is set up primarily for these events and nothing else. This ministry is powerful as it develops strong bonds between youth who attend. It also helps to develop servant hearts for those who are ready to commit. However, some youth, those not quite ready for the deep commitment required, get left out of the ministry completely.

**The More the Merrier**—a youth ministry philosophy in which participants come together only for big events like national youth gatherings, Youth Quakes, or huge group happenings. These events can get youth excited about worship and community, but many teens need a more intimate setting. The thought of huge events, where hundreds and thousands of kids gather in one crowded auditorium, scares them. Large events on the local level can create great opportunity for inviting the unchurched, but unless leaders plan a way to incorporate visitors into the ongoing ministry, youth tend to cycle between the emotional high of the big event to the emotional lows of everyday existence.

**Money! Money! Money!**—Yes, it is true, many youth ministries focus entirely on raising money for some trip or event. Sometimes the event or trip never works out! This style of ministry does provide some fellowship opportunities, but seldom do the young people to grow in faith, because they never gather around God’s Word! Congregation members may begin to see the youth ministry as a negative, always asking for money.

**Tea For Two and Two for Tea**—This youth ministry philosophy is based entirely on one on one relationships between the youth minister and individual young people. In a wonderful way, one on one conversations do help youth leaders to get to know the personality of each young person. This knowledge facilitates ministry to youth. Unfortunately, the one on one method also opens the door to early burnout in the youth minister. It does nothing to get the young person connected, in a healthy way, to a community of believers. Consider the fact that while Jesus spent extra time with Peter, James, and John, He led a group of twelve as He modeled community and fellowship.

**Country Club**—Many youth ministry programs develop tight bonds between certain youth, and then exclude others from the group because the outsiders “don’t fit in.” Unfortunately, this can easily happen in congregations that support a Christian day school. The public school youth often feel like they are on the “outside looking in,” while the day school youth have so much fun with one another, they do not notice the absence of some of their peers.

**Harry/Harriet Charisma**—There once was a youth minister who came in and “wowed the socks off” the youth. His/her personality drew them into events, and Harry/Harriet intentionally planned such events, knowing that the youth would come because they loved him/her. But what happens when “Harry/Harriet” leaves? Often the entire program falters, because it was founded on Harry/Harriet and not on Jesus Christ.

**Gilligan’s Island**—This youth ministry philosophy assumes the youth are “an island unto themselves.” The youth ministry happens exclusively at *one* church, with *one* group of youth, without *any* outside resources, help, or interaction. No one else in the world realizes that people live on the “island,” because the batteries in the radio that links



them to the outside world are dead. Such isolation teaches an unhealthy view of the communion of saints and encourages a narcissistic self-focus.

**The Bible Will Do It**—This youth ministry philosophy focuses primarily on the study of Scripture. Great! So many youth ministries fail to encourage teens to open the Bible and spend time pondering God’s Word. However, if the youth spend all their time in study and never leave the safety of the Bible class, their faith is never tested, challenged, or applied. It remains largely academic and its relevance is easily disconnected.

Effective youth ministry incorporates a variety of approaches, because a multi-dimensional program will attract and hold more youth and will foster greater growth in the individuals who participate.

### **An Integrated, Multi-Dimensional Youth Ministry Philosophy**

Having taken a look at what a youth ministry philosophy is and what it should *not* be, we can address the question, “What is youth ministry?” Ministry occurs when God’s people care for one another and share God’s grace with each other in the name of Jesus Christ. Youth and adults, gathered together around God’s Word, grow together in their faith. By the power of that Word, the Holy Spirit works through His faithful people as they share forgiveness, grace, compassion, celebration, and hope in Christ Jesus. Ministry occurs when God’s Holy Spirit is present among His people in worship, study, and care for each other.

Youth ministry is ministry together with and for youth. Since it is youth *ministry*, and not youth football or youth dance class, theology must inform the philosophy you will want to develop. The Scripture passages below will help you shape a theological philosophy for youth ministry in your congregation.

Deuteronomy 4:9–14

Ephesians 6:10–20

Deuteronomy 6:5–7

1 Corinthians 3:10–11

Matthew 18:1–5

Mark 9:42

1 Peter 3:13–17

Romans 12:2

1 Timothy 4:12

Psalms 71:17–18

Matthew 28:18–20

2 Timothy 3:14–17

Psalms 78:1–8

Titus 2:3–8, 15

2 Timothy 4:1–5

Ephesians 4:17–5:21

Proverbs 22:6

### **Baptism—identity formation as a child of God.**

One of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence is that of identity formation. Youth ministry should be about helping youth to identify themselves as children of God in Baptism. It should encourage frequent and meaningful participation in the Sacrament of the Altar where the family of God gathers to receive forgiveness, strength, and hope. Youth ministry connects teens to the church in ways that nurture a sense of participation in the life of the congregation, a celebration of significant rites of passage, positive connection to traditions, and growing understanding of their family and personal faith histories.



**Servanthood—a grateful servant heart that imitates Christ.**

Developing opportunities for youth to serve the church, one another, and the larger community is essential. Society does well at encouraging acts of service during times of crisis, but youth ministry can nurture habitual servants, youth who help because service expresses the essence of who they are in Christ.

**Character—practices Christian ethics and decision making in daily life.**

As all youth leaders know, youth ask tough questions about life issues, and they look to the church for help in understanding the dilemmas that the world throws at their feet. Youth need a safe place to explore values, doubts, and prejudices. Youth leaders need to provide a thoughtful approach to life's paradoxes. Youth need help in exploring current events, and they need the guidance Scripture provides in dealing with issues of right and wrong.

**Disciple—have the tools and desire to spend time in God's Word.**

Youth ministry should be about training and equipping lifelong Biblical scholars. Young people need to be exposed to the wide variety of study tools that are available to them as they search the Scriptures. Youth ministry needs to introduce youth to the wonder of a God who only grows more marvelous and wonderful as we come to know Him in Jesus Christ through His written Word and Sacrament.

**Worship—an openness to, and an understanding of, different worship styles, traditions, and rituals both new and old.**

Youth just like adults become creatures of habit. The richness of traditional worship forms and the energy of current musical styles both have merit and benefits to offer. Youth leaders provide the understanding, education, and direction that will foster growth in worship.

**Intergenerational—interaction to and with younger and older generations.**

Learning and teaching go hand in hand. Youth serve as excellent role models for younger children they can inspire those who are older. Likewise, youth learn more about their own faith when they have opportunities to share that faith, learned in childhood, with others. They also grow through the rich nuggets of wisdom, the faith stories, and the commitment of more mature believers.

**Fellowship—a Christian youth subculture.**

Peer groups. Fitting in. Relationships. As youth struggle with developing their own identity, relating to other people grows in importance. Youth need opportunities to interact within a safe, Christian setting Youth ministry can provide this, both for member youth and visitors.

**Evangelism—a focus on sharing the Gospel of Christ with family, friends, community and the world.**

Many youth think of evangelism as banging on doors and beating their Bibles while standing on the street corner. Youth ministry should offer amore positive picture of outreach. Youth need opportunities to pray for the lost. They need encouragement in making godly choices and setting Christ-like priorities. They need to learn the whys and how's of sharing the Christian hope with others in a caring, nonconfrontational way.



**Stewardship—a willingness and desire to offer back to God the blessings they have received.**

In a secular society focused on self-indulgence and instant gratification, youth ministry should emphasize all aspects of self-management and self-control. The privilege of Christian stewardship may influence the type of fundraisers the youth choose to do. Youth ministry can encourage young people to tithe of the wages from part time jobs. Youth ministry should also provide opportunities for young people to volunteer their gifts and talents in the church and community and to practice the care and management of God's creation. Finally, youth ministry can help youth appreciate the material gifts God has given them.

### **Developing a Youth Ministry Philosophy of Your Own**

Resource Page 4A will ask important questions designed to help you develop your own youth ministry philosophy. That philosophy will not remain static. You will create and recreate it as you bring to it more experiences and insights. The Lord will continue to guide this dynamic process, strengthening your ministry with young people. Ask Him to direct this process as you carry out your philosophy of youth ministry.



## Resource Page

1. What key beliefs and experiences make up your current philosophy of youth ministry? How does what you are doing now mirror your philosophy.
2. Evaluate what you are currently doing in light of your philosophy. What intentional changes would you like to make in your philosophy or your approach? Why?
3. Based on your philosophy, what do you hope your youth ministry will one day look like? Where would you like to be? (This is your vision.)
4. What do you need to do to get from where you are to where you would like to be? (This is your mission.)
5. Who needs to get involved in these efforts to develop and implement the philosophy?
6. What indicators will show your congregation's progress in implementing the philosophy? How and when will you measure progress?

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