

## **Week 4 Day 6 – Real Life Youth Ministry Experience Project**

### **Youth Ministries**

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#### **Assignment:**

Submit the write up of your participation/observation of the youth ministry you have been working with for the past few weeks. The project paper should be 2,000 words (minimum).

#### **Response:**

### **Project Introduction**

The youth ministry observed for this project is called *Student Parking* and is led by Pastor Grant English of *Pinecrest Community Church* in Parker, Colorado. While the youth ministry has been in place for some time, Pastor Grant came to lead the youth group just over a year ago. Since his arrival he has been re-building what had become a “run-down” youth group with over-worked leaders and a declining youth population. Over the past year, the ministry focus has been on building youth leaders and instilling a new ministry philosophy and strategy. They are just now beginning to see the fruits of that effort and are starting to build plans for the next phases of the youth ministry—focusing on youth discipleship and growth (note that this has not been absent, it is just not the current ministry *focus*).

The youth group is divided into two groups:

1. ReFuel for Middle School teens
2. Detour for High School teens

Pastor Grant was gracious with his time, insights, and access to his ministry and overall philosophy. He is a pastor called to do youth work and has been doing so full time for the past 15 years. He has been a great help not only during this particular project, but during this course in general. He has read all of the materials required for the course, and even commented that the book *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry* was “the best youth ministry book ever written....ever. If you don’t want it, I’ll buy it from you. It goes beyond student ministry but how to pastor and lead long term with effectiveness and integrity.” In my general observation over the past few weeks, it is clear that Pastor Grant embraces and is implementing many of Doug Fields’ principles (either as a direct result of reading Fields’ works or through the trial and error of a life in youth work—likely a mixture of both).

## Ministry Observation

The ministry observation included attending two Wednesday night services and a personal interview with Pastor Grant and two of his adult leaders (Chris Lane and Matt Davis). The Wednesday night observation included a general observation of the ministry (from “the back of the room”) as well as “spying” in on the High School boy’s and girl’s small group interactions. The personal interview included a set of questions as a result of the ministry observation as well as questions drawn from course materials.

In the two Wednesday night sessions, there was an average total of 23 teens in attendance (a fairly typical weekly representation). Of this total, 15 were Middle School teens and 8 were High School teens (almost a 2:1 ratio). There was also an average of 7 adults (not including myself) in attendance—representing a respectable 3:1 adult to student ratio.

The Wednesday night program followed the same basic schedule on both nights:

1. 6:30 pm – 6:45 pm : Reconnecting and Game Time
2. 6:45 pm – 7:00 pm : PowerPoint Game
3. 7:00 pm – 7:25 pm : Big Talk
4. 7:30 pm – 8:00 pm : Gender Specific Life Groups

The adult leaders are provided with the above schedule and an outline of the evening’s discussion topic (used for both the “Big Talk” and the Life Group sessions) and a set of discussion starters and questions. At the beginning of the “Big Talk” the teens break into their Life Groups with their adult leaders (they are all in one room to start and then break off to separate areas of the church for the Life Group sessions).

Reconnect and Game Time: The first 15 minutes of the program are set aside for the teens to play various games (e.g.: 6-Square and tossing a football) and reconnect with each other and the adult leaders. During this time the adult leaders intentionally connect with teens by either engaging in the games or striking up conversations with those not playing (in general about half of the teens played games and half hung around talking). The goal is ease to teens into the evening and allow them time to socialize with each other and the adult leaders.

PowerPoint Game: The next 15 minutes of the program typically involves a PowerPoint game (the youth group meets in the open sanctuary of the church (no chairs) and the youth use

the main stage projector for this part). The PowerPoint game gets the teen's minds engaged and ready for the rest of the evening—providing a transition from the Reconnect and Game Time. The games are fairly simple, yet challenging enough to not be boring.

Big Talk: The next 25-30 minutes is what Pastor Grant calls “Big Talk”. During this time the entire youth group meets together and discusses the topic and/or passage for the evening (the first night observed was entitled “Images of Gold – Daniel Chapter 3” and the second night was “Acting Like An...Donkey – Daniel Chapter 4”). This involves Pastor Grant reading the passage, asking questions to spark discussion, and guiding the discussion as it moves along. This time provides a “primer” for the more intimate discussion that occurs the Life Group sessions.

Gender Specific Life Groups: The evening concludes with the teens breaking into gender specific Life Groups (small groups) with an adult leader. This time is also called “Small Talk” and there is a guided discussion with questions and further bible passages (as required). During this last 30 minutes, the teens discuss the lesson in depth and begin to make more personal applications. Each Life Group is led by an adult leader (and this Life Group meets week to week—they are not mixed up every week). Note that this Life Group model (including the term “Life Group”) is patterned after the adult Life Group ministry of the larger church (an example of church integration).

The program observation and participation was limited to these two “programmed” evenings, but there is much more going on in the ministry as a whole. In general, the ministry is focused on Wednesday night (with a special emphasis on the Life Group encounters which provide an opportunity for the adult leaders to connect and interact with teens over a longer period of time—and in a more intimate setting) but also includes several larger events. For example, the weekend prior to the first week’s observation the group attended a “Fast Break” retreat in Estes Park (a video of the weekend was shown just prior to the PowerPoint game with CD copies handed out to all of the participants). In addition, the teens do the usual ski trips and other teen-focused activities (which change from year to year) and will soon be participating in mission trip events—these have not occurred yet because the focus has been on getting youth leaders trained and in place over the past year.

The overall principle of the ministry is clearly relational. Pastor Grant’s ministry philosophy is clearly stated: “I want kids to encounter Christ. To be changed by Jesus. That happens in community and deep personal relationships. That doesn’t generally happen in big events and mountain top experiences, I’m banking on (adult) leaders having the relationship.” This is evident in the programs he has in place, the leaders he is developing, and in the overall focus of the ministry. Pastor Grant is not just “talking the talk”, he is doing the hard work of putting it into practice—and he freely admits that “it’s hard” (his words) doing relational ministry.

## Youth Observation

Much of the first Wednesday night's observation was spent paying particular attention to the interaction and actions of the teens throughout the entire program. Following is a summary of some of the more notable observations:

- Observation: While both girls and boys played the 6-Square game, almost all of the girls that played were younger. The older girls tended to spend this time in groups talking with each other and/or an adult leader—they paid very little attention to the games.

Commentary: While this is a general stereotype, it certainly appeared there was a gender preference for the game time versus spending time socializing. In addition, there were definite “clicks” among the girls who spent their time socializing (there was very little “mixing” between social groups). There were a few boys who did not play the game, but they tended to be “loners” and did not form social groupings.

- Observation: The boys that played the game were especially motivated to “challenge” or “beat” Pastor Grant as soon as he started playing the game. It was evident they were testing themselves against Pastor Grant in particular (versus the other male leaders).

Commentary: The boys in the youth group were interested in testing their physical “prowess” against the “leader of the pack”. If one of the boys was successful in beating Pastor Grant (in something as simple as a game of 6-Square) the entire group cheered and congratulated the boy. (Note: this was a positive episode, not negative...this was an example of young boys testing their “metal” against their leader).

- Observation: Overheard one girl tell Pastor Grant (and later his wife Amy) that she was going to get her driver's license later that week. She waited around for some time before she had a chance to bring it up, and it was clear she was looking for adult affirmation.

Commentary: This was an example of a “social marker” in this teen's life (Elkind, Chapter 5). Getting her driver's license was important, but the recognition by two important adults in her life of the event was just as important (if not more so).

- Observation: During the “Big Talk” session there was a lot of “processing” of the information and a hesitancy to openly share thoughts about the material. The middle schoolers were more apt to share—even “making up answers” that did not really make much sense or apply to the material.

Commentary: The dynamic of the “Big Talk” session was interesting—especially across the age differences. The middle schoolers were more apt to interact, but appeared more interested in being included versus providing a thoughtful, accurate answer (one of them

even provide the same *incorrect* answer multiple times). The high schoolers were very quiet during this session—almost as if talking would have somehow “demeaned” them or simply been “un-cool”.

- Observation: In contrast, very different interactions occurred during the “Small Talk” or “Life Group” session. In these sessions the teens were more open and shared their thoughts and feelings. There was a clear sense of a more intimate, open, and honest environment versus the larger group setting.

Commentary: Here was the prime example of the power of relational ministry. As soon as the teens got into their Life Groups the mood and interactions changed considerably. It was obvious the teens trusted their adult leader(s) as well as the other teens in the group. The level and depth of their sharing and discussion increased drastically.

- Observation: This observation is really about something that was not observed during any of the programs—cell phone or text messaging. Over two full Wednesday evenings there was only one noticed occasion where a teenage girl was texting anyone and no cell phone conversations occurred at all.

Commentary: When asked, Pastor Grant indicated that the lack of cell phone and text messaging is a result of two things: 1) The program moves too fast for much of it (although this one not true during the opening session—and text messaging did not occur then either) and 2) They have developed a culture of “electronic fasting” in the youth group (this is especially true for the larger events such as retreats).

## Integration of Class Learning

### **1. How did this ministry compare, exemplify or contrast to what we have learned about youth ministry so far?**

The *Student Parking* ministry to exemplifies many of the basic models and principles learned in this class. This may be due in large part to Pastor Grant's agreement with much of Doug Field's approach to youth ministry. In fact, this particular youth ministry is so closely tied to our learning it could be used as a "role model".

In particular, the ministry demonstrates:

- 1) Godbearing ministry focused on a Relational model (Dean and Foster)
- 2) Emphasis on adult youth leader development (Fields, Chapter 8)
- 3) A purpose driven ministry approach—the ministry goals drive the ministry programs (Fields, Chapter 10)

This has not always been the case, however. Prior to Pastor Grant taking over the ministry and instilling many of the core principles and philosophies being taught in this course, the ministry did not exemplify many youth ministry "best practices". The ministry was program focused (no ties to a definable ministry purpose) and centered on a few leaders (with no leadership development plan). One of the most important things Pastor Grant has done to alleviate this issue (aside from implementing a ministry plan and philosophy) is to reduce the number of large events and focus on a few more impactful events and programs.

One of the items from our teaching that was not observed during the project was a missional focus for teens. This may be due to one of two factors: 1) The youth program is in the early stages of development and the focus has been on developing leaders, so the missional focus of the ministry may be a future goal or 2) This simply was not observed during the limited time available. The first of the two possibilities appears to be the more likely.

### **2. What is the underlying theology of this ministry?**

As clearly stated by Pastor Grant, the underlying theology of the ministry is that teens need to have a life-changing encounter with Christ and that this happens best in community—specifically small groups. In addition, significant emphasis is placed on developing and reproducing adult leaders that develop relational ties with teens.

This ministry is in agreement with the "Foundational Goal" identified in Week 1, Lecture 1: "If we agree on the assumption that Christianity is about a relationship with God, then one of the key goals of youth ministry should be to introduce youth to this relationship (an encounter with God), and to foster the development of that relationship (discipleship,

spiritual maturation).” *Student Parking* is currently focused on the first part of this equation (the encounter), but is poised and ready to develop into the second (discipleship).

### 3. **How does this ministry carry out the practices of Godbearing or the five Purposes of Ministry (Fields)?**

First, *Student Parking* is noticeably following the Godbearing principle of relational ministry for youth. In fact, this is central to the ministry and the primary guiding principle. There is a concerted effort to connect with teens with the express purpose of pointing and leading them to a life-changing encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ.

Second, the following is an evaluation of how *Student Parking* ministry is carrying out each of Doug Field’s five Purposes of Ministry (recognizing that not every one of them can or should be a strength or primary focus):

- 1) Evangelism: This is currently accomplished more through “word of mouth” than any explicit program or function of the ministry. This may be a future goal of the ministry, but is not principal today.
- 2) Worship: This is admittedly missing from the Wednesday night experience (at least as far as music is concerned). The intent is for teens to get plugged into the larger church worship experience on Sundays and develop a lifestyle of worship in their daily lives. This does not appear to be a strength of this ministry today (intentionally).
- 3) Fellowship: This is the one of the key drivers for this ministry and the programs are designed to achieve this objective. From all indications it is working—as teens are getting connected with each other as well as significant adult leaders in their lives.
- 4) Discipleship: This is the second key driver of this ministry. While fellowship has been where much of the effort and attention has been paid over the past year (intentionally), the program is poised to move into this area—and is already beginning to do so.
- 5) Ministry: Teens are challenged to partake in many of the “adult” ministry and outreach programs of the church congregation (for example, having the teen Life Groups adopt a family for this upcoming Christmas, which is a church-wide initiative). Mission trips are planned for the future, but the youth group has not been ready for them yet (an indication of the ministry’s focus on doing the right things at the right time).

## Youth Leader Interview

The following are the results of the in-person interview with Pastor Grant and two of the *Student Parking* youth workers (Matt and Chris). Included in the results are the questions asked and the paraphrased answers).

Question: There is no corporate worship time on Wednesday night, why?

Answer: Primarily due to the transition between activities, we tried it and it just didn't work. Teens were not getting anything out of it, but we may revisit it in the future.

Question: What is your overall philosophy of ministry?

Answer: I want kids to encounter Christ...to be changed by Jesus. That happens best in community and deep personal relationships. It's not about the big events or mountain top experiences. Instead, I'm banking on leaders having the relationship, but it takes longer—we may not see the reward for years.

Question: Discuss your philosophy of “integration with the larger church body” versus “separate youth ministry”—which is the right model for you?

Answer: “Both...And”. We prefer to use both models. Wednesday evenings is for the teens specifically, but on Sunday they are integrated with the church (no Sunday morning teen-specific programs). We try not to fill the calendar with “junk”—we want to allow the teens to breathe and participate in church programs (such as larger church outreach programs).

We had a Sunday morning program for teens, but we “tanked it” because:

- 1) It wasn't really working
- 2) Killing it allowed teens into other places to serve (i.e.: children's ministry)
- 3) We needed the building space for a growing children's program

Question: Any teens playing a leadership role? If so, how?

Answer: Not today within the student ministry itself—they are leaders in other ministries such as children's ministry workers. This is something that will develop over time.

Question: What are you most intentional about? And is it working?

Answer: Being real. Most teens view adults as “not real”. It is working to a certain extent (as much as they are willing to let it work). We are seeing glimpses in the junior high group especially.

Question: What “scares” you the most about teens today?

Answer: First, is their level of apathy—they aren’t passionate about *anything*. They are observing life instead of getting engaged. They feel that every institution has proven itself unworthy (government, church, and marriage as examples). In close second is their sense of entitlement.

Question: What “impresses” you the most about teens today?

Answer: If they get a vision, a touch, or a glance of the Holy—it changes everything! They are not as compartmentalized as adults, so once they take off it consumes their entire lives.

Question: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made in youth ministry? Would you undo it if you had the power?

Answer: Not trusting volunteers enough early in my ministry. I wanted to control everything as young pastor because it was “my reputation” at stake. I wouldn’t undo it because I’ve learned from it.

Question: Why is doing ministry this way (relational ministry) “hard to do”? (These were Pastor Grant’s words to me during a side conversation during my first observation night).

Answer: Because we had to start from the ground up. There was no foundation here so we had to take steps backward before we could move forward. It’s hard to start something well versus just running a program—and this style of ministry takes time to develop.

General Commentary:

- About 75% of our teens come from divorced families—which impacts who shows up each week. (This is a reflection of the “permeable family” referenced in Chapter 6 of *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* and has a direct influence on the ministry philosophy and the teens themselves).
- I am currently spending roughly 65% of my time developing youth leaders and 35% on youth directly.



## Questions Raised

During the course of the ministry observation and as a result of analysis and integration of class materials, the following questions still remain regarding the *Student Parking* ministry:

1. There is currently a focus on developing adult leaders, but no such emphasis or for developing student leaders. This is likely a result of the ministry timing (being early in the ministry development plan), but it does leave a question: Will this be a focus in the future? And if so, when is it targeted? There is presently a vacuum in youth leadership (teens themselves) at *Student Parking*.
2. There appears to be an absence of a clear missional purpose for the ministry (discipleship seems to be the focus right now)? There is nothing wrong with this at the current ministry development stage, but there was little indication of the future prospects.
3. Significantly absent from the Wednesday night experience is a time of corporate worship. As indicated by Pastor Grant, the ministry used to do this but it was ineffective and awkward. The current objective is to integrate the teens into corporate worship on Sunday mornings, but that he will evaluate and re-visit this decision in the future. The question is if teens are truly getting a sense of corporate worship on Sundays or not?
4. The final question is really a curiosity. *Student Parking* is a prime model for our class (integrating almost all that we have learned and putting it into practice). It will be interesting to see what this ministry will look like in 3-5 years? The outlook is very optimistic and God is clearly guiding and blessing the efforts to date.

### Works Cited:

Dean, Kendra & Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2003.

Elkind, David. *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*. Rev. ed. New York, NY: Perseus Books, 1998.

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