

# Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 2

## How to Grow Strong Youth Groups

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**Purpose of this Volume:** Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures for youth sponsors who want to involve maximum numbers of junior and senior highs in meaningful evening youth ministries. Focused primarily on equipping sponsors for the typical size youth group (ten to forty young people), this volume also provides success suggestions for (a) churches with fewer than six youth and (b) the large church with 100-700 teen-agers.

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## I. Strong Churches Have Strong Youth Ministries

The purpose of youth groups is not to grow larger churches or to meet parental preferences. *The mission of church youth groups is to help the largest possible number of youth make a life-changing connection with Jesus Christ and grow spiritually in that discipleship-relationship.*

Yet, because most church-attending parents want strong youth programs, congregations tend to prosper when they provide such groups. Churches that fail to provide such groups damage their present effectiveness and amputate their futures. (The chief exception to this rule is churches in retirement communities that restrict property ownership to senior adults.)

Strong youth groups that magnetically attract and spiritually nurture youth do not happen by accident. Like every other facet of healthy, effective churches, a composite of several factors makes that possible. Committed, knowledgeable adult sponsors are the drive-shaft in that vehicle. Strong youth groups happen when capable adult sponsors (a) understand the foundational principles that underlie all effective youth groups and (b) apply those principles with methods that fit their church's size and cultural circumstances.

## II. Twelve Principles that Build Effective Youth Groups

Early in the last century, one denomination's mission agency measured foreign missionary candidates with the following five criteria: an effective missionary is physically strong, emotionally stable, mentally literate, socially sensitive, and spiritually compelled.

Effective youth sponsors need the same five qualities. This is a challenging role, the complexities of which are greater when viewed at close range than when observed from a distance. Fewer than 10 percent of church members have youth-sponsor aptitude. That same percentage holds true for clergy. Seminary training does not automatically produce youth-leader skills.

The following twelve principles enable youth sponsors to get maximum results from their natural talents. Sponsors who understand and live by these twelve principles often see their groups reach maximum size potential and effectiveness. Sponsors who fail to understand these twelve principles make many mistakes, suffer unnecessary pain, and often burn out before they learn these twelve principles in the classroom of experience.

**1. Understand the unique purpose of youth groups.** Many people are confused about what Sunday-evening or weeknight youth ministries try to accomplish. For example, some church members are convinced that youth programs should be like Sunday school—with refreshments thrown in. Youth group sponsors who lack clarity about the unique goals they are trying to achieve have difficulty retaining a positive attitude about their ministry.

Sunday evening or weeknight youth groups consist primarily of *experience-centered* Christian education, rather than *content-centered* education. Learning the multiplication tables in the fourth grade is content-centered. On the other hand, learning how to ride a bicycle is experience-centered. You can read several books on how to ride a bicycle, but the experience of being on a bicycle is essential to the learning process.

Sunday school is more content-centered and less experience-centered. Evening youth groups are more experience-centered than content-centered. Because our understanding of education in general is so content-centered, we sometimes forget about the power of learning that comes through fellowship and shared experiences. Sunday evening youth groups often exert as much, or more, impact on the spiritual development of youth than does content-centered learning by itself.

On Sunday evening, young people learn what it means to be part of the church through the experience of *being* the church together. This experiential process prepares youth for serving on church boards when they become adults. It also helps them learn skills that improve their

adjustment to all of life's group experiences. The John Wayne days of the American frontier are gone. Learning how to live together in a group is an important part of learning to live.

**2. Meet at the same time each week.** Most effective junior and senior high youth groups meet weekly, not monthly. Pick the best time of the week for your group to meet and stick with it. Groups that switch meeting times every few weeks gradually disintegrate.

In one group, after meeting at 5:00 p.m. for three weeks, the sponsors said, "Why don't we change it to 4:30 p.m.?"

A couple of weeks later, they said, "We'll be out of town next weekend, so let's meet at 6:00 p.m. next Sunday."

The following month, they decided Wednesday evening was more convenient.

The group fell apart. Youth, like adults, are creatures of habit. When you change the meeting time once, some kids are unsure of when the meeting is. If you change it again, the less active youth fade away. Eventually, everyone disappears.

Should junior highs and senior highs meet together or separately? In churches where the high school and the junior high youth meet together, total attendance seldom exceeds eight to twelve, and most of the youth are junior highs. The senior highs drop away, discouraged by the "immaturity" of junior highs (how soon we forget how we behaved in the life stage through which we just passed).

Only in very small congregations—or in larger churches consisting primarily of adults over age sixty-five where only three to six total youth are available to attend—do junior and senior highs successfully meet together. In those situations, a "family atmosphere" holds together the wide age span.

In congregations where numerous youth are available, a shortage of adult sponsors or inadequate sponsor-training materials often causes the two groups to meet together, but such groups are self-limiting in size. They usually stay small.

Food is the major exception to the adverse influence of junior highs and senior highs meeting together. Many successful groups eat a meal together each week. Example: In one church the junior highs meet at 5:00 p.m., senior highs meet at 6:30 p.m., and the groups share a "snack supper" at 6:00 p.m.

**3. Meet at the same place each week.** Ordinarily, the best meeting place is the church. If possible, provide space (one room for junior high and one for senior high) that the youth can decorate to suit themselves.

Few youth groups flourish by meeting in a home. Taking turns meeting in different homes each week or one month at a time is even worse. Again, the fringe area attendees do not know where the meeting is. Or, if they heard, they forget. Other interpersonal factors can get in the way, especially in high school groups where boy-girl dynamics become stronger. Susie may not want to go to Jane's house because Jane stole her boyfriend. The church building is neutral territory, and everyone remembers its location.

**4. Structure every meeting in a balanced way.** Church members and parents have several views of what should happen in a youth group. Sponsors usually encounter two extremes.

- Some adults say, "What we need is Bible study; those kids need to study the Bible!" People with that view are very content-conscious.
- Adults at the other extreme say, "Fun is what counts; kids need to learn that the church is a fun place!"

Either of those extremes kills a youth group. If you do nothing but intensive Bible study—making the youth group a cloned Sunday school class—you soon lose at least one-half of the

kids. They do not all drop out, and they do not fall away instantly. But the group gradually shrinks to a shadow of its former self. Youth are willing to be serious part of the time, but few of them want to be serious all the time.

If you go to the other extreme and take a purely fun-and-games, social approach to youth ministry, kids disappear in approximately the same fashion. When you eventually learn why you lost them—they probably will not tell you; they tell their parents—the quotations sound something like this: “I don’t have time to fool around like that. We don’t ever *do anything!* We just goof off.” Youth want to have fun, but they have serious streaks, too. They will not give their precious time to a church group that lacks depth and substance.

The solution to this dilemma is balance in the design of each meeting. Strong evening youth groups use five components in virtually every weekly meeting. One or more of these five ingredients may occasionally be absent, but in most meetings, all of them are present: *recreation, business session, study, worship, and food*. Do them in the following sequential order at each meeting.

- **Recreation:** This varies, depending on the time used for the total session. Ordinarily, recreation should not consume more than 25 percent to 30 percent of the meeting time. Many sponsors find it better to *begin* with recreation than to end with it. Example: In a junior high group whose meetings began at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday and ended at 6:30 p.m., about one-half of the kids showed up at 5:15 p.m. or 5:20 p.m. One summer, the sponsors flip-flopped the agenda and started with recreation. (They often played touch football or volleyball on the church lawn.) One week after reversing the meeting agenda, the boys who formerly showed up in time for refreshments started arriving early, fifteen-to-thirty-minutes before the official meeting time. This is the “Reverse Oreo Cookie Format.” You put the good stuff on both sides (start with recreation and end with food) and put the less exciting stuff in the middle.
- **Business Sessions:** These are always a bit chaotic. Adult sponsors want them to be systematic and rational. This rarely happens in youth groups, especially junior high groups. Yet, some of the most important learning experiences occur in business sessions. As young people struggle to decide matters such as how to accomplish a project, how to spend money, when to take trips, where to go on trips, and how to help needy people, they learn group decision-making skills. Example: Deciding at the beginning of the year to give one-tenth of their group’s income to missions and benevolences in the community or elsewhere is an excellent learning opportunity.

Sponsors handle business meeting chaos better if they remember some of the church governing-board meetings they have attended. Adult and youth business meetings are not that dissimilar. The noise level may be slightly lower in adult meetings, but the off-the-wall comments may not be that different. Youth are just normal human beings struggling to make decisions and work with one another. Such situations are never without a touch of craziness.

- **Study:** This may take twenty minutes, but the time expended on this meeting component can vary with groups, depending somewhat on the meeting time and day of week. The study should never consume more than one-third to one-half of the total meeting time.

How should you select the material? Inexperienced sponsors often say, “Let’s ask the kids what they want to study.” The kids will discuss this issue at length but usually have trouble coming up with ideas. A better procedure: Provide the group with two to four options, perhaps with specific study booklets to examine, and ask

them to decide. Like adults, kids like to choose. Like adults, they find it easier to choose than to invent the list of topics from which to choose. See Section VI below for study material possibilities.

Do not forget, especially when working with junior highs, that regardless of what material you pick or how democratically you make the decision, several kids say they do not like it, and a few complain about it constantly, even though they actively participate in the study. For junior highs, especially the boys, refraining from complaints about the study material is apparently risky behavior among peers.

- **Worship:** This may not last more than five-to-seven minutes, and it may be shorter with junior highs than with high school youth. Yet, the worship should have serious integrity, done in an attitudinal atmosphere that makes it genuine worship. Like adults, youth are capable of focusing their minds on God in ways that power their lives.
- **Food:** Adults who look on from the bleachers and make comments about how youth ministry should be done sometimes say, “Why should we have to feed these kids at every meeting? Do we need to entertain them all the time?” Yet, do churches have many quality fellowship events for adults without feeding them? Just as food is a significant element in helping to produce good fellowship among adults, it is also essential in youth groups.

**5. Provide leadership opportunities for numerous youth.** In most groups, electing new officers twice a year, rather than annually, is beneficial. Some groups even change three times a year. When you are in junior or senior high school, election as an officer is an ego boost. For some youth, not getting elected is quite disappointing. Thus, when a group elects officers in September, no more chances to serve in a leadership role for another year seems a long way off. However, if elections are coming again in January, youth for whom such a role is important can hang in there and hope for next time.

Do not elect officers during the first meeting in the fall. Wait until the second or third week of September to be sure the kids you elect become regular attendees. If you elect officers the first week, you may find to your dismay that you elected a treasurer who came to the first meeting but never returned. That leaves you trying to figure out, “How do we replace this officer? Or should we wait to see if she starts attending again?” Postponing elections for three weeks also heightens the anticipation level.

Involve all of the youth in planning everything the group does. Growing a youth group bigger than twenty always requires breaking it up into smaller groups, since a group larger than that number does not give everyone a chance to talk in planning meetings. Thus, if your group has thirty-to-forty youth, break them up into a committee system. You might have a recreation committee, a study committee, a trip committee, a community service committee, a fund-raising committee, etc.

On the other hand, most groups of fifteen-to-twenty junior or senior highs find it advantageous to use a “committee of the whole” strategy for planning and decision making. This is necessary because breaking a group of fifteen or twenty youth into groups of three or four often means that when committees report back to the total group, it tends to re-discuss the recommendations and may set some of them aside. This is a “downer” for the committee that made the recommendations.

**6. Coordinate the high school and junior high sponsor planning.** About August 1, sponsors from both groups should meet with the pastor or youth director and the Christian education leaders to make plans for starting the year. Then, about every three months in small churches and perhaps as often as every month in large churches, sponsors from the various youth groups should meet as a youth council with appropriate staff members and youth planning groups. In most midsize and large churches (more than 150 in average worship attendance), a part-time or full-time paid youth director is essential, and that person carries the overall leadership role for developing and leading the youth council.

The larger the church, the greater the likelihood that it has youth choirs and/or children's choirs to which some youth group members also relate. Thus, the whole system must be coordinated to avoid conflict that arises when various leaders accidentally schedule trips, fundraisers, or parties on the same date. Even in small churches, the sponsors should meet every three months to review calendars and prevent scheduling conflicts. Parents often plan out-of-town family trips months in advance. Some parents have youth in two age groups. Sponsor coordination among the groups keeps family needs from getting trampled in the confusion and avoids the time expenditure necessary to repair the resulting relationship-fractures.

**7. Use the same sponsors all year.** Some church leaders ask, "Why not just trade off sponsors from month to month?" Others say, "Let's make it easy on everybody. We'll ask the parents to take turns as sponsors. They can do it for a month at a time." *That sounds so good* because it looks so simple. However, that approach is usually fatal to youth groups! Such groups tend to crash and burn about two to three months off the launch pad.

Youth, like adults, need to spend five or six hours with leaders to begin feeling comfortable with them. If you rotate sponsors every month, the youth never get comfortable relating to any of the youth leaders. Thus, youth begin dropping out of the group because they have no sense of security—no bond of relationship—no feeling of trust and communication. In the strongest youth groups, the same sponsors serve for the entire year, sometimes for multiple years, if they find the youth-sponsor role a meaningful experience.

**8. Use the right combination of sponsors.** Two couples work best—two couples for the junior high group and two other couples for the high school group. Why?

- (a) Two couples have fun and fellowship with one another.
- (b) Two couples provide emotional support for one another. Youth sponsors need someone to talk with about complicated situations that they had no idea would arise.
- (c) Several personality types and perspectives among sponsors provide a balance not possible with only one personality slant.
- (d) Sponsors are easier to recruit. A two-couple sponsor system allows you to say when you recruit sponsors, "If you have to be out of town some Sunday evening, the other couple can handle the group." This does not mean that you should tell them to trade off each week. As noted above, that error prevents youth and sponsor relationships from developing. But a two-couple system gives sponsors the freedom to occasionally be away.
- (e) Two couples reduce the tendency of administrative detail work to fall back on the pastor or the Christian education chairperson. A sponsor team of two couples, or one couple and two single adults, can handle anything they face with a minimum of outside assistance.

**9. Select sponsors who can communicate with youth.** Teenagers often develop communication problems at home. Almost by definition, youth have communication problems with parents. For many kids, this is one of the most difficult aspects of growing up. A youth sponsor may provide the only opportunity to talk about personal problems with an understanding adult. This makes the personality style of adult sponsors and their service as role models of equal importance with the Bible content transmitted in Sunday school. Years later, many mature Christians report that their opportunity to talk with an adult sponsor before meetings, after meetings, and on trips helped point their lives in new directions.

What is the optimum age for youth sponsors? Adults of virtually any age make effective sponsors, *providing they possess the motivation and skill to communicate with youth*. Sometimes, the optimum sponsor package is a couple who just finished raising their kids. They are approximately age forty-five, they love kids, and they have close-at-hand experience with all the developmental stages of children and youth. Because they know that the various phases through which all teenagers pass are temporary, such sponsors are more relaxed with youth. They know that the high and low moods of junior high youth soon pass. They know that being a brokenhearted junior high girl who has lost a boyfriend is quite painful but this pain is not permanent.

Church members often say, “We need sponsors who are in their twenties.” Many young adults are fine sponsors, but age does not automatically produce expertise. Sometimes, young adults are so near the age of the youth that they over-identify with youth problems. Being a good sponsor has less to do with age than with temperament, motivation, and communication skills with youth. Some excellent junior high sponsors are in their sixth decade of life.

When selecting sponsors, remember that most adults tend to relate better to one age level of youth than to another age level. Some adults are “junior high types.” Other adults are “high school types.” Adults who work with a youth age level in which they have no natural communication gifts may do it well enough to get by, but they must work much harder at it. This phenomenon has nothing to do with adult sponsor intelligence. Senior highs do not need smarter adult sponsors than do junior highs. Effectiveness has more to do with the natural ability to get on the right communication wave-length for that group’s age range, a talent that is usually more natural gift than learned skill.

**What are the keys to effective adult-youth communication?** The skill adults need to talk with kids differs little from the skill needed to talk with other adults. Why, then, do parents have so much trouble talking with their teenagers? Parents feel totally responsible for this young person. Parents hope that he or she does not grow up to be incompetent, immoral, or end up in the penitentiary. That puts a great weight of responsibility on parents, causing them to talk to teenagers in ways that they would never think of when conversing with their adult friends or their kids’ friends—which is the primary reason why many parent-teenager relationships break down.

In other words, sponsors should avoid the conversational habits that parents get into. Unless the sponsor has a seriously defective personality, he or she usually finds that “parental pattern” easy to avoid. After all, sponsors do not have total responsibility for keeping these kids out of the penitentiary. This allows sponsors to be more relaxed and follow the rules that parents use with their adult friends but often fail to follow with their teenagers.

One youth director printed *Five Keys to Great Conversations* on a business card, handed one to each youth sponsor, and illustrated each one. “Memorize these five keys so thoroughly,” he told the sponsors, “that when you shut your eyes you can see the list on the back of your eyelids. For fourteen days, consciously practice them in all your conversations with adults and youth. People will describe you as a wonderful person with whom to talk. Consciously practice these

five rules for another fourteen days and they become an unconscious part of your conversational pattern.”

- *I am proud of you.* You can express that in many different ways. Examples: “You sure have your hair fixed nice. I really like it that way.” “That’s a good looking shirt.” You can express the opposites of that phrase in countless ways. Examples: “You’re wearing that short dress again today!” “When are you going to get your hair cut?”
- *Tell me about yourself.* Four other versions of that phrase: “*Tell me what’s happening to you.*” “*Tell me what’s going on in your life.*” “*How’s it going?*” “*How are you doing?*” These sentences tell people that you are interested in them. What are the opposites? One of the most tiresome is “Let me tell you about myself.”
- *What is your opinion?* Another version of that phrase: “What do you think about that?” Two opposite communications: “Let me tell you what I think!” “I don’t care what you think; that’s the way it is.”
- *Avoid finding verbal fault with what a person thinks, says, or does.* No one can totally avoid that, but people who intentionally try to bypass those opportunities accomplish the goal more often than they thought possible.
- *Listen, listen, listen!* If you use the first four keys to great conversations, you have plenty of listening opportunities. If you do not use the first four keys, you do not have to listen much. People spend little time talking with you.

**10. Expect sponsors to face and deal with discipline challenges.** All youth sponsors have some discipline problems. The perfect youth group does not exist, anymore than the perfect congregation exists. Death, taxes, and discipline problems are always with us. Effective sponsors expect and learn to deal with these challenges as they come along. Ineffective sponsors internalize the discipline problem by saying, “I’m a failure; I guess I’m no good as a sponsor!”

Many of the principles that adult business managers use also apply to church youth groups. For example, effective sponsors rarely correct a youth while others are present. Reserve public admonitions for the times when you are talking about the attitude or behavior of the entire group.

Group squabbles and individual discipline challenges are often learning opportunities, sometimes the best learning opportunities of the entire year. Two principles are essential to dealing with youth discipline problems in productive ways: Be firm! Be kind! Not one without the other. Both!

In most instances you should handle a discipline challenge by saying, “I’m really concerned about your *behavior*. This is not something we can tolerate in the group. It doesn’t work here.”

In a few instances (expect one of these per year), talk with the young person about his or her *attitude*. What if you have taken all the positive steps to address a disruptive habit? You gave the individual additional attention or made him or her “leader of the band” on some project. Sit down privately with this individual and say, “I’m really concerned about your attitude. I sense that you are not very happy with the group, because you continue to disrupt the group. What can we do to help you feel better about your participation in the group?”

Use a threat to visit with the youth’s parents about behavior or attitude only as a last, last resort. (Usually, junior high sponsors must use this method only about one time every year.) In most cases, it is extremely effective and often becomes a positive turning point for a junior high’s participation in the group. Senior high sponsors use the threat of talking with parents more rarely. Along with being careful not to use this threat often, *never use it unless you mean it!* If you are not willing to follow through on it, do not say it. Kids see a fake threat faster than light goes through a window.

Count on this: You will have at least one big, unexpected discipline challenge on every out-of-town trip. Do not blame yourself by saying, “What’s the matter with me that these things don’t work out well? I guess I don’t know how to plan things!” Stay calm. Discuss the matter with at least one other sponsor and figure out how to cope with it.

If the problem is extreme, go immediately and talk with the parents as soon as the group gets back to town. Do not let the sun go down on this problem, or you will regret it. Upon arriving home, many youngsters who get into serious trouble distort the story when telling it to their parents. That means you should arrive at the home at the same time the youth does. Most parents handle such matters in a reasonable way if they have all the facts. Without all the facts, a few parents allow a child to influence them into thinking you are some sort of monster, and then pass on their child’s fabrication to other parents in the church. This is *not* one of those instances where “silence is golden.” Here, silence can become a lead weight that sinks your youth group’s effectiveness for the rest of the year. Tell parents the whole story *immediately*.

In a few extreme instances (every couple of years) a trip’s discipline challenge is so great that you must telephone parents and give them two choices: Do they prefer that you send the youth home on a bus, or do they want to drive there and pick up the youth? Talk with the parents frankly about the problem when you telephone them. Tell them that you want to sit down with them to discuss it after you return from the trip. Agree on a time when you can come by for that discussion.

In most cases where sponsors are forced to send a youth home from a trip, the youth fabricates a plausible story to tell the parents on the way home. Most parents believe the sponsors, but a few parents believe their child’s story. Therefore, for two reasons, you *must* sit down with the parents after you return from the trip:

- Be sure the parents understand that you care about their child, even though you could not tolerate his or her behavior on that trip.
- Be sure the parents have clarity about what happened on the trip.

Otherwise, a few parents try to protect their child by saying things that poison the sponsor(s)’ reputation with other parents.

**11. Select effective fund-raising procedures.** Look for large projects that require a great deal of work and group involvement but produce sizeable income. Avoid projects such as car washes and bake sales that require immense time and energy from sponsors and parents but produce slim financial results. One example of a large, profitable project is an annual dinner theater, sponsored by high school youth and sometimes involving junior highs and many adults. Another example is “Eat Lunch with the Church Bunch.” Sponsored by junior highs or senior highs and held on Sundays after morning worship, select a simple-to-prepare meal. It provides fellowship for the adults and substantial income for the youth group.

**12. Understand the age-related needs of youth.** Because junior and senior highs are at different developmental stages, they have different needs.

*Junior highs are shy.* They sometimes exhibit the opposite extreme, because they are shy. Junior high youth work hard at trying to fit in by the way they dress, by striving for group acceptance through their social behavior, or by striving for group acceptance through their mental ability. No human being should have to pass through junior high years on the way to adulthood, and no parent should have to observe this at close hand. However, it is a necessary prerequisite to arriving at age twenty-five, so we have to live with it.

*Junior highs are more sensitive to criticism or approval than are senior high youth.* If they thought they could get the truth from their sponsors, the big question junior highs would most like answered is, “Do you really like me?” Sponsors who communicate personal acceptance to

junior high youth will probably do fine with the other challenges. Failure to communicate that emotional acceptance usually means failure at every other youth group responsibility.

*Junior highs are eager to assert themselves in activities where they are confident or excel in the required skill. They like to participate, but this inclination is quite different from a desire to compete. As they get older, they like to compete and begin to measure activity opportunities in that way. But most junior highs prefer to participate rather than compete: their self-confidence level has not yet reached the point at which competing is fun.*

*High school youth need a spirit of group belonging. The best high school youth groups develop that sense of *esprit de corps* to the highest possible degree. High school youth are usually able to handle situations like adults: they sometimes act like adults and part of the time they don't. In transit between youth and adulthood, these youth are at various points on that maturity journey. However, all of them can act very adult in some situations (as in youth worship) and very childlike in other circumstances (as on youth trips or at summer camp). High school youth often exhibit tremendous personality changes in brief time spans—very mature at one moment, very immature a few minutes later—depending on the situation.*

*High school youth are quite conscious of peer acceptance—even more so than their parents, whose behavior is also extreme at this point. Please note that all adults dress pretty much the same way. The major difference in conformity patterns between adults and youth: the young people come up with the new hairstyles and clothing styles first; after a few months or years, the adults imitate them.*

*Involving youth in developing a youth ministry mission statement can have significant value. Youth and youth leaders at First United Methodist Church, Throckmorton, Texas, created the following:*

### **Our Youth Ministry Mission Statement**

To minister to and with youth (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades – churched or unchurched) in our area through participation in

- Youth fellowship groups
- Youth worship services
- Christian Youth concerts
- Youth Bible Studies
- Youth Recreation Teams
- Youth Work Groups
- District and Conference Youth Events

By helping youth to

- Learn and explore the Bible
- Build self-esteem
- Learn how to share their faith
- Express their talents
- Set goals for the future
- Invite other youth to get involved
- Cope with problems
- Discover God to be real in their lives
- Challenge each other to go one step further
- Be a team of both men and women working together to better serve the church, the community, and themselves

### **The Bond**

- To listen and learn from leadership (both youth and adult)
- To respect others and their feelings (no put downs)
- To love and learn about Jesus Christ
- Always respect your place of worship
- Set an example for other youth to follow
- Remain with the group and participate in a positive manner
- Will not use drugs, alcohol, and/or tobacco products

### **Bill of Rights for All Youth and Adults**

- I have the right to be happy and to be treated with compassion. This means that no one will laugh at me, call me names, or hurt my feelings.
- I have the right to be safe. This means no one will hit me, kick me, push me, trip me, hurt me, or threaten me.
- I have the right to have personal property respected and kept safe. This means that no one will throw my belongings, mark my property, or steal any of my belongings.
- I have the right to be myself. This means no one will treat me unkindly or unfairly because of my race, physical strength, size, sex, religion, features, friendship groups, age, handicap, financial status, clothing or personal performance.
- I have the right to learn about myself. This means that I will be free to express my feelings and opinions, when appropriate, without being punished or interrupted.
- I have the right to hear and to be heard. This means that no one will yell, scream, shout, or make loud noises when someone else is talking; I will listen quietly.

### **III. How to Make Effective Beginnings Each Fall**

How leaders launch in the fall is a prime determiner of the year-long size and vitality of junior or senior high youth groups. A good fall launch produces another key ingredient of strong youth groups: parental support and involvement. When coupled with the principles outlined above, the following strategies can help a youth group become very strong, very quickly.

These procedures are based on the assumption that the youth group is not meeting during the summer months. While many youth groups scatter three big social events through the three summer months—such as a swim party, a hamburger cookout, and an ice cream social—about 95 percent of strong youth groups do not schedule regular weekly meetings during the summer. This is not negative; in most ways it is an asset.

The annual cycle of interest young people show in youth groups mirrors that of their parents' church participation enthusiasm. Youth interest starts increasing in September and rises to its peak by December. It goes down in January and recovers in February, after which it gradually rises toward the first part of May and drops to almost zero by the time school is out. The few exceptions to this bottoming-out in the summer are found in churches that traditionally hire a young, full-time summer intern who arrives with energy, new ideas, and the determination to prove his or her skill in youth ministry.

In other churches, stopping the regular meetings during the summer has other benefits. Church leaders have the opportunity to recruit new sponsors. Youth and their parents have time to forget any serious problems the group experienced last year and make a new start with refueled hope. If your church is in that tiny percentage that keep the youth groups going in the summer, you should at least alter the weekly meeting formats. Otherwise, you miss that great change-of-pace opportunity that is one of summer's chief values. If you miss that chance, your group may enter the fall with low enthusiasm that costs you dearly during the crucial fall months.

During September, new youth enter the groups; they moved to town during the summer. During September, new youth come into high school groups from junior high groups and enter junior high groups from elementary grades. September is the opportunity for a terrific new beginning, without which an effective middle of the year and a fabulous finish are impossible.

To make a great fall start, recruit your sponsors in May, no later than July 1. During the first week of August, schedule a planning session with all the sponsors, the pastor, and if applicable, the youth director. During early August, the pastor (senior pastor in midsize and large churches) should write letters to all parents of junior high and senior high youth, asking the parents to meet with him or her at the Sunday school hour on a late August Sunday. Meet with junior high parents one Sunday morning and senior high parents another Sunday morning. Both meetings must occur prior to Labor Day weekend. Do *not* ask the two parent groups to meet the same Sunday. Do *not* meet with them on a weeknight. Sunday morning is the only time when more than one-tenth to one-fourth of them will attend. Few parents have a previous commitment or can fabricate a decent excuse for 9:30 a.m. Sunday morning. Do not worry about the parents who attend adult Sunday school classes. This meeting is important enough to ask them to miss one class session during the year.

At the Sunday school hour meeting with each group of parents—junior high and senior high parents—do the following:

**Begin by selling the parents on the value of evening youth groups.** Use the information from Principle #1 on page 2 above to explain the difference between content-centered learning in Sunday school classes and experience-centered learning in youth groups. This explanation is essential, since many of them have no idea what additional benefits their youth can receive by youth group participation. This is especially important for parents of junior highs. These kids cannot drive cars, so their parents must bring them or arrange for another parent to transport them. If you do not sell the “household transportation directors” on the youth group’s value to their child, it may not matter how great the program sounds to the junior high kids.

**Next, introduce the youth sponsors.** Brag on their ability with, commitment to, and concern for the youth.

**Next, ask for the parents’ help.** This is a good time to say, “We need your help in transportation. We may ask you to provide a car for some of the trips and special events. If your youngster has not yet arrived at that frightening stage where he or she drives a car, we need your help in transportation to and from the weekly youth meetings.” The pastor or youth director may want to tell a sad story about a seventh grader who really wanted to join the junior high youth group, but the parents would not bring him or her. Pull out all the stops. Lay on tons of potential guilt. Since parents hold the keys to transportation, they have the power to determine whether their youngsters attend or watch from distant sidelines.

**In the junior high parents’ meeting** say something like the following: “If you are a junior high parent, you understand junior high youngsters as well as I do, perhaps better than I do. You know that if your seventh grader has not been involved in a junior high youth group before, he or she may resist that idea. You are familiar with the characteristic response of junior highs to many new ideas: ‘I don’t want to do that!’

“So I am asking you junior high parents to help us in this way. Give us a chance to get your youngster involved in a program that we know will be fun—and meaningful to his or her spiritual development. Promise me that you will deliver the body to the building for four consecutive weeks, starting the first week after Labor Day—whether the body wants to come or not. After

four consecutive weeks, if the body still doesn't want to come, that means we have failed to provide a good program, so stop forcing your youngster to attend. But please give us a chance by making sure that your youngster is present the first four weeks."

Junior high parents understand that concept. Their cooperation gets you past the initial resistance of many youngsters who, because of characteristic junior high shyness, are vacillating back and forth about whether to attend.

**Next, ask the parents to sign up for bringing refreshments or a snack supper during the first few months of the fall.** Sitting there together in the church sanctuary or fellowship hall, the parents are likely to say yes. Do not let this golden moment pass without taking advantage of it. Pass around a clipboard. Ask everyone to sign up for one Sunday evening (Wednesday evening if the group meets then). This parent commitment is important for reasons other than food. Parents who sign up to provide a snack supper are likely to encourage their children to attend the youth meetings during the first few weeks of the fall.

**The best procedure for refreshments or snack suppers:** Ask two couples (or two households in single-parent families) to work together to provide the snack supper on each date. Why two sets of parents? A few parents always complain that they would just as soon do it alone, especially in small congregations. Listen to them, smile, nod, and disregard their complaint. *Always use two couples or households!* When the date comes for them to serve the snack supper, these two households will talk with each other on the telephone and decide that one of them will come and serve it, with both households chipping in on the cost. "After all," they say to each other, "It is silly for both of us to go do it. I'll do it this time. You can do it next time."

Some of the parents think you are not bright because you ask two households to sign up on the same date. Smile, and do it that way. If you have only one household signed up to provide the snack supper, guess who ends up handling the snack supper if that household is out of town that weekend? Right! The sponsors! They have enough to do in their sponsor roles, so try to keep the sponsors, the pastor, and the Christian education leaders out of the meal business. The tips are meager and providing meals unnecessarily wears down their morale.

*The snack supper follow-up system looks like this:* Make multiple reminder-postcards that contain blanks for names, dates, and the number of youth to be fed. This saves much telephoning and many problems. Put one of the sponsors in charge of mailing the two reminder cards every Monday morning—to the households that signed up for next Sunday. When those two households get the postcards, they know it is their turn this week; they know how many youth to prepare for; and they know the other parent(s) name(s). Thus, because the sponsors never have to telephone the parents, the parents never get an opportunity to say, "This is not a good weekend. Could we do it another time?" With the postcard reminder system, the parents must call *the other household* if they want to say no. By using the August meeting sign-up system and the reminder cards, you get the added benefit of starting to roll up the snowball of parental support and involvement.

Some large churches with sizeable youth groups find an alternate method works better for the snack suppers. They use two or three "formula meals" in endless rotation, week after week. They serve hot dogs one week, hamburgers the next week, Sloppy Joes the third week, and so forth toward eternity. Some large churches employ people to prepare these formula snack suppers. In other large churches a group of older adult volunteers enjoy serving on this ministry team and do it every Sunday evening, all year. Most churches that use this formula approach ask the youth to pay a dollar or two for the meal, to help cover the costs.

**Another way to facilitate a positive fall launch:** Put \$1,000.00 in the church budget for each youth group. During August, the church treasurer deposits that amount in each youth group bank account. Thus, each group begins the first Sunday of the program year with the enthusiasm of planning its first trip and events, rather than with the depressing feeling that it cannot afford to do anything until it gets enough money. (This procedure is quite different from and produces more positive results than merely putting a line item in the church budget to assist with youth work.) The \$1,000 deposit does not mean that youth groups have no fund-raising efforts; they do. However, it allows each youth group to get off the runway with more effectiveness in the crucial first three weeks of each program year.

**Some congregations systematically integrate the junior high youth programming and confirmation classes.** As part of their confirmation year, such churches require youth to attend both Sunday school and youth groups. Thus, the kids in confirmation class become involved in the junior high youth group, bond with other youth, and tend to continue in subsequent years.

#### **IV. How to Recruit Youth Sponsors**

Spring or early summer is best. May is not too soon. June is pushing it. Several months ahead makes the position feel important to people, which it is. Then, too, sponsors should attend a planning session in early August so that they are ready for the first youth meeting the week after Labor Day. For the best results, use the following principles.

Do it in person, not by telephone, letter, email, or fax. Anything other than eyeball to eyeball says to the potential sponsor, “This is not a very important task. It isn’t worth the effort required to sit down and visit with you, so I’m using an impersonal means of communication.”

Tell the persons you contact that they were selected by a group of peers and *why* they were nominated. In most churches, this means that prior to your conversations with candidates the Christian education committee should meet and decide what kind of people they want serving as youth sponsors. This may sound unnecessary, but it is at least ten times more effective than asking people to fill vacant slots. One Christian education committee came up with seven qualifications for youth sponsors. They then used the list in their recruitment process. Sponsors should have:

- ✓Sense of responsibility
- ✓Personal commitment to God as revealed in Jesus Christ
- ✓Christian faith that they express in daily life
- ✓Sufficient emotional stability to adapt to varying situations
- ✓Willingness to let other people be themselves
- ✓Ability to relate to and work with other adults
- ✓The courage to deal constructively with conflict and tension

With this method, two committee members, or in some cases the pastor and chairperson of the Christian education committee, make an appointment to meet with the potential sponsor or sponsor couple. Whoever does the talking should begin by saying something like this, “During the past month, our Christian education committee has defined the type of person that they feel we would want to invite to work with our young people.”

Removing the list of seven points from pocket or purse, the recruiting spokesperson continues with, “Here is the type of person we are looking for.” After reading the seven points aloud while letting the person or couple follow along on the sheet, the recruiter adds, “The Christian education committee feels that you meet these qualifications. We want to invite you to consider serving as a high school youth sponsor (or junior high sponsor, whichever the case may be) for the new year, beginning this September.”

The recruiter leading the presentation then adds, “You will not, of course, be working by yourself. Each of the youth groups will have two couples (or a couple and two single individuals)

working together as a team. That way, in case you have to be out of town some weekend, someone else can handle the group on the night you miss. We are not saying that we want you to trade off every week, because that is not good for the group. But we are saying that you will be working with a team of other adults.” The presenter then mentions the names of the other adults the committee is inviting to serve. If this couple knows the other couple, that information may exert positive influence on their decision.

The recruiter then says, “We know that you may not have a clear picture of how sponsors carry out their responsibilities. We will provide the information you need. At a planning meeting early in August, the pastor (or the Christian education chairperson, or whoever oversees the youth program) will help you to outline the year and discuss potential study materials.”

The recruiter tells the potential sponsors, “You’ll have support from the parents. The youth have a snack supper at each meeting. You do not have to prepare that or solve transportation problems for trips. Parents and other adults in the church take care of those tasks. *Your role* is to serve as sponsors.”

The recruiter then outlines the specific responsibilities: “This begins in September and ends in May. The meetings are on Sunday afternoon at 5:00 p.m. (or whatever day and time the group meets). Your role as sponsor involves . . .”

Do *not* ask them to say yes or no. Close the conversation with, “This is a very important responsibility in our church, and I know that you will want to think it over. We prefer that you not make a decision right now. You’ll want to pray about it and discuss it. Just let me know when you have made up your mind.”

Recruiters often see an ironic result from this concluding statement. Insist that people *not* make up their minds right now. Change the subject to something else—the weather, current news, the football game—which proves that you are not going to pressure them. Often, before you leave the house that evening, they bring the subject up again and say they would like to be sponsors. Giving people the freedom *not* to decide often frees them to make an immediate decision.

*Whatever method you use to recruit sponsors, do not ask for volunteers in the church newsletter!* That is the worst possible approach. Churches that beg for sponsors in their newsletters, over the years, experience more and more difficulty getting sponsors. That way of asking is equivalent to bold print in your church newsletter that says, “This is a job that just about anyone with any level of talent can do. If you are alive and breathing, please fill this unimportant slot that nobody else is willing to take.”

Paradoxically, the lower you set your standards for sponsors, the more difficulty you have getting them. Who wants to take a job for which there are no qualifications except availability?

## **V. Why Are Trips So Important?**

Some parents and adult church members do not recognize the value of youth trips. However, these trips are as important as the study/discussion sessions at weekly youth meetings.

*Trips provide a common goal.* To build group cohesiveness, youth need a goal around which they can quickly unify. Such a goal should be fun, something that makes sense to youth, something they can enjoy, and something that is happening soon. A trip fills that goal role superbly.

*Trips provide practice in decision-making.* As the youth begin discussing where they will go and how to use their time, they gain experience and skill in making decisions together.

*Trips provide a shared experience.* After an out-of-town trip in the fall—no matter what kind of trip it is or where the group goes—the kids become a group in a different way than when they left town. They have now shared experiences that no one else in the church has shared. They did things that nobody else has done, and they come back talking about those experiences. This gives

them a unique group identity, transforming them from a collection of individuals into a cohesive group.

Youth groups should also participate in district and regional youth events and summer camping programs sponsored by your denomination. This involvement provides spiritual growth and education experiences not possible locally, positive peer relationships with other youth, leadership development and skill-building opportunities for youth and sponsors, and specialized advice for how to start and maintain a strong youth program. However, as important as these district and regional denominational events are, they do not function nearly as effectively to build group identity as does a trip that your group plans and executes alone.

*Trips reduce interpersonal conflict.* Joe and Johnny may not get along with each other at Sunday night youth group meetings. After a trip such personality conflicts often disappear. Joe and John have to bunk together and live together over the weekend. Because they must tolerate each other while doing something fun together, the abrasive edges often get shaved off their interaction pattern. The relationships do not *always* get better; sometimes they get worse, and unexpected new problems can arise. However, nothing replaces the opportunities provided by the experience of a trip for strengthening interpersonal relationships.

*Trips build positive peer relationships.* The friends we have as we grow up probably shape our personalities as much as the theology we study, although both have an influence. Friendship relationships among young people exert a profound life-long impact. Growing up in a youth group shapes their lives in enormous ways.

When children reach thirteen to fifteen years of age, parents lose control. The influence they have exerted up until then stops. The parents kid themselves with the illusion that they are still in control, but they are not. The only control parents have at that stage is the control they exerted within the youngster's personality during the formative period prior to the teen years. At about thirteen to fifteen, peers take over most of the control. Much that happens to young people from that point on depends on peer influences. Trips and youth activities help build positive peer relationships on which parents can rely for the final shaping of personality.

## VI. Finding Study Materials

Two factors are crucial to selecting youth study/discussion material.

*First, select subjects that connect with youth needs.* A national survey of 2,365 Protestant youth from five mainline denominations conducted by the Search Institute revealed the top topics about which youth want to learn more. Seventy-four percent want to learn friendship-making skills; 71 percent want to learn to know and love Jesus Christ; 69 percent want to learn more about who God is; 68 percent want to learn how to make decisions about right and wrong; 65 percent want to gain a sense of purpose in their lives; and 61 percent want to develop more compassion and concern for people. [*National Christian Reporter*, 2-3-95]

*Second, select material on those subjects that communicates with youth.* Regardless of its high quality content, study material that lacks an understanding of how youth receive information remains unabsorbed.

**A. Published Resources:** In addition to denominational resources that you have found reliable, contact organizations such as (a) Group Publishing ([www.grouppublishing.com](http://www.grouppublishing.com)) and (b) Youth Specialties ([www.youthspecialties.com](http://www.youthspecialties.com)). These two companies' resources for youth ministers/sponsors provide effective study and programming ideas for contemporary youth.

**B. Homegrown Possibilities:** One capable sponsor clips articles from the daily paper and uses them for discussion topics. "What is the Christian perspective on this issue?" he often asks.

Sometimes he prepares several discussion questions in advance. Sometimes he asks one of the youth to prepare discussion questions.

Sponsors of a high school group used the following method for a “vocational study,” with excellent results. It can take up an entire school year, but you may prefer to use it every few weeks, as a variation from the usual meeting pattern. Make advance arrangements to take your group to an office or place of business on a specific evening. For example, the group mentioned above, on successive Sunday evenings, visited an attorney’s office, a physician’s clinic, an insurance agent’s office, and an architect’s office.

Ask the person your group will visit to review with the youth the answers to four questions related to their work. Tell them to encourage the youth to ask further questions in response to the four-answer presentation.

Question #1: “What exactly do you do, and how do you use the hours of a typical working day?”

Question #2: “What educational or other preparation is required of people who do this type of work?”

Question #3: “What talent or interests do you need in order to enjoy doing this kind of work?”

Question #4: “In what ways might being a Christian in this work cause you to do it differently than if you were not a Christian?”

Some of the people in your vocational visits will say amazing things that give youth insight into the kinds of ethical decisions with which adult Christians must grapple each day.

These vocational visits usually take about one hour and thirty minutes, including some travel time. After the visit, stop by a restaurant for soft drinks. Continue the discussion by asking the youth to name the most interesting thing they learned. Often, young people talk with sponsors at those casual moments about their life dreams. Many youth ask questions that they did not bring up during the interview itself.

Another homegrown study option: invite pastors from several denominations to come and speak to your group for fifteen minutes about the beliefs or their denomination, followed by a question and answer discussion. (Stress brevity in these invitations; most clergy have trouble keeping within the fifteen-minute boundary.) A better way to accomplish the same goal: make arrangements to visit each pastor’s church, where the youth group can experience the atmosphere of the worship center and the pastor can talk on his/her home turf. In a few instances, a field trip to a worship service may have value. One youth group visited a Catholic Mass during the Sunday school hour. Another youth group made advance arrangements to visit a Jewish synagogue for Friday evening worship. In his sermon, the rabbi spoke on the basic beliefs of the Jewish faith.

## **VII. Ten Commandments for Micro Groups (Fewer than Six Youth)**

“With only four teenagers in our church, how can we run a strong youth program?” Leaders in more than one-half of America’s 350,000 congregations ask that question. The size of these youth-drought churches varies. Some such churches are small; others are just “gray.” The following principles enable big youth work in micro groups.

**1. Forget the principles that make ten-to-forty-member youth groups effective.** In most smaller churches, the pastor must maintain direct involvement with the youth program. The ideal is intermittent pastoral involvement that assists the adult sponsors. When no lay leadership is available, the pastor gives primary leadership and laypersons “help out” with transportation and chaperon roles.

**2. Do not elect officers.** Make decisions by consensus.

**3. Plan monthly recreational events.** Only by doubling in size can tiny youth groups gather a sufficient crowd for fun social events. The nature and content of the monthly “fun thing” is not the crucial issue; its magnetic-attraction ability is! Since 55 percent of teens are unchurched, and the average teen has six to eight friends, one-half of which he or she is willing to invite to a group event, the micro group easily becomes a viable-size monthly youth event with twelve to fifteen kids.

**4. Overcome the temptation to lump together junior and senior highs.** This inevitably becomes a junior-high ministry in which the senior-high youth are not “fed” and most of them fade into the distance.

**5. Plan two out-of-town “fun” trips each year.** One in the summer and one in mid-winter work well. Again, the nature and content of the trip is not the issue; the magnetic-attraction ability is! Ask youth to invite one friend. He/she does not have to be unchurched, since your motive is not evangelistic. These guests serve the important purpose of enlarging the group enough to make the trips more fun.

The church budget should underwrite part of the trip’s cost—perhaps travel and housing. Youth should pay for other parts, such as food and recreational activities. Splitting the cost gives both church and youth a feeling of responsibility and ownership. Do not hold fund-raising campaigns to finance these trips. Let the youth raise their money individually. In small groups, working together in fund-raising projects does not create the same fellowship and unity that it does in large groups.

**6. If your micro youth group has two or three high-school kids, consider a pastor-led, every-other-Sunday, breakfast Bible study for them.** Plan no recreation or business. Use pure Bible study, except for social chitchat during the meal. Make this a strictly high school thing! Allow the junior high Sunday school class to meet that group’s study needs.

**7. Do not conduct regular meetings during the summer.** Start in September. Stop in May. Do one fun trip in the summer.

**8. Use resources that fit this size group.** In addition to denominationally published leadership materials that you find helpful, contact organizations such as (a) Group Publishing ([www.grouppublishing.com](http://www.grouppublishing.com)) and (b) Youth Specialties ([www.youthspecialties.com](http://www.youthspecialties.com)). Ask them to recommend resources appropriate for small youth groups.

**9. Small towns may present unique opportunities.** In densely populated parts of the country where three or four small churches of the same denomination are only a few miles apart, one congregation can build a junior-high group while another church sponsors a senior high ministry.

Small churches in small towns sometimes develop a joint youth ministry with one or more congregations of other denominations. In some communities, that joint group is an *additional* experience for kids in each church’s micro youth group. In other small towns, especially those with populations under 1,000, the community youth ministry is truly “joint.” Sponsored by three or four small churches, often with the paid youth director at the largest church carrying overall leadership responsibility, the community “Kids for Christ” group is the only game in town. Making such a community system work requires a youth council with representatives from each church and a paid staff person who is accountable, not just to one large church but to all congregations in the consortium.

**10. Remember that *micro* does not have to mean meager.** Research indicates that small churches have exceptional records in the spiritual formation of youth, many of which grow into exceptional congregational and denominational leaders. With proper strategy, structuring, and leadership, *micro* can mean mighty!

### **VIII. The Gigantic Youth Ministry (100-700 Kids) Is Different!**

Mega youth groups are not just larger versions of ten-to-forty-member youth groups. They differ in two primary ways.

**A. Giant groups use a different central organizing principle.** Despite the importance of a highly skilled, paid youth minister, mega youth groups are not solo-personality led. Giant groups center on an idea or goal, not on one person. Often, that central organizing principle, or goal, is “reaching unchurched kids for Christ.” (Since 75 percent of people who will ever become a Christian in their entire lifetime do that before age eighteen, this seems like a sensible focus.) Many such groups recognize that music is a powerful magnet that builds large groups. Unlike micro youth groups or the typical ten-to-forty-member youth group, mega groups *focus on the existing social networks of teenagers*, not just on the teenagers in that particular congregation.

Usually, the large group has several subgroups that meet weekly for Bible study. Generally speaking, the youth ministry has several tracks. Example: One church has 150 youth in Sunday school. On Friday night, thirty kids that show up at the coffeehouse ministry are involved at no other time of the week. Another ten kids who participate in one of the weekly accountability groups do not attend other youth functions. Still another twenty-five kids attend only on Sunday night. Ten others show up on Wednesday nights only.

A few large churches, instead of “graduating” junior highs to the senior high group, over a several-year period invent six youth groups. The first new youth group starts as a seventh grade junior high group. The next year, that group, which is now eighth graders, stays together. The church forms a new seventh-grade youth group, consisting of the previous year’s sixth graders plus seventh-graders who moved to town that summer. Each of the six youth groups stays together as it moves through the educational pipeline toward high school graduation. (Some of the kids who do not go away to college stay together in a Sunday school or young adult group after graduation.) This process of “growing up together” welds a closely-knit group that is open enough to attract and nurture newcomers.

**B. Giant groups use a different leadership style.** Most large youth groups have more adult volunteers per 100 youth than do smaller youth groups. For example, one youth ministry that serves 250 high school and junior high youth has twenty-five adult sponsors that serve in a variety of roles. The youth pastor says, “When our youth ministry was smaller, numbering only sixty kids, three adult sponsors led it.” The efficiency of scale observed in business corporations seems to operate in reverse in youth ministry.

Although volunteers and paid staff may attend youth leader seminars sponsored by churches with giant youth ministries, youth leaders are mostly homegrown and locally trained. Large youth groups seem to develop volunteer leadership skills by orienting people, involving them, and equipping them with in-service training that builds from strength to strength.

Growing and maintaining a large youth ministry requires a paid leader who can do more than love and communicate with kids. He/she must have mature skill with youth ministry in LARGE youth groups. Most such groups hire a mature-in-both-years-and-perceptions, inspiring, and skilled pastor, teacher, preacher youth director. His/her motivations and strengths were usually built or honed in another large church with an oversized youth ministry. These exceptional youth leader skills are not taught in seminary; they are “caught” through experience. Churches with

giant groups usually pay this youth pastor so well that other church pastures to which they get relocation invitations look brown instead of greener. Consequently, he/she stays around several years, grows in skill, grows several adult youth leaders, and grows the youth groups bigger in spirit and size.

Some midsize to large (but not mega) metropolitan churches partner with Young Life, a multi-denominational organization that works with youth in school systems throughout the United States. Such congregations call a youth director trained by Young Life, who becomes the congregation's employee and uses the congregation's facility to build a gigantic youth ministry that includes, not just that congregation's kids, but unchurched youth from across the community. Young Life trains these staff members with the classic principles of youth evangelism:

- (1) Focus on Jesus.
- (2) Start with their need.
- (3) Say it in their language.
- (4) Package it attractively.
- (5) Go to their places.
- (6) Give them love.

("Billy Graham Seminar Gives Tips to Promising Evangelists," *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, p. 2C [Knight Ridder], date unknown)

The Young Life paradigm, providing the church has a capable senior pastor, often results in (a) sizeable growth in that congregation's membership and (b) gigantic youth ministry. To obtain detailed information about this model, go to [www.younglife.org](http://www.younglife.org) and seek to make contact with a local Young Life leader for congregations in your state (not all states offer the model).

Robert E. Webber cites outstanding youth groups across the United States, most of which fall into the giant category, whose patterns may predict the future in youth ministry (*The Younger Evangelicals* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003]). Contact with and/or visits to these congregations may be of value to youth group leaders:

- Baltimore, Maryland—Arbutus United Methodist Church, whose organizing principle is "process evangelism" for youth
- Grand Rapids, Michigan—Mars Hill Bible Church
- Chicago—Lawndale Community Church
- Mount Prospect, Illinois—"Souled Out" kids ministry, organized around a Thursday Night Prayer Meeting
- Edina, Minnesota—Christ Presbyterian Church, organized around a Youth Upper Room Worship Service
- Jackson, Mississippi—Westwinds Community Church
- Seattle—Mars Hill Fellowship
- Los Angeles—Mosaic Church
- El Cajon, California—Shadow Mountain Community Church, organized around small group discipleship

## **IX. The Bottom Line**

Is youth ministry important? Answer that question with the following questions: Who were the last three Miss America contest winners? Can you name the 1995 Heisman trophy winner? Who were the last five Academy Award winners for best actor? Can you list the last three Nobel Prize winners? Even among the brightest and the best, the applause dies. Achievements are forgotten.

Can you name three people who helped you through a difficult life adjustment? Can you name a teacher who aided your educational journey? Can you remember a church leader who inspired you into new life directions?

Are the people who make the most difference in our lives the ones with *credentials*, or are they the people whose *concern* concretely connects with us at crucial points in our life development?

Who has better opportunity to make that life-changing connection than youth sponsors?