

The Condition of Youth Workers

By Dan Webster

Youth ministry has come a long way baby! When I entered full time student ministry in the early 1970's most people doing the work were *not* looking at it as a life long career option. Most looked at youth ministry as a necessary step in their career development path to the promise land of senior pastoring.

Today this is no longer true. Student ministry is finally seen as *a valid life long position of great importance*. People are waking up to the fact that while the student population may only represent 20% of those living in an area, they are 100% of our future and warrant full time focus. The majority of people in student ministry today honestly believe that any career move from youth work would be a demotion, even to the senior pastorate. I know I felt this way.

When I stepped out of student ministry in 1990 after seventeen high-energy years, it wasn't because I hated students. I chose to take some time off to negotiate and recover from my own burnout and mid-life experience. Four years later, having navigated the white water of mid-life crisis and emotional fatigue, I've returned a healthier, wiser and more focused person.

To get reacquainted with what was happening among the leaders of student ministry across America, I partnered with the National Network of Youth Ministry in 1995 to administer a *National Youth Worker Survey*. We distributed about 1500 surveys and got back 496. The return was geographically balanced throughout the United States.

A wide variety of denominations and parachurch youth workers responded from all different ages. 70% of the respondents were male, 30% female. From the sampling, 65% were full-time youth workers, 9% part time, and 26% were volunteers. 71% were married, 24% were single, and 5% were engaged, separated, divorced, or remarried.

Coupled with the survey, Doug Clark (from the NNYM) and I did numerous focus groups with youth workers all around the country. We did the survey and the focus groups hoping to discover what youth workers were feeling about the challenges of doing student ministry and how they were doing personally. Let me list some of the statistical highlights of the survey and then comment on the state of youth workers today.

One other thing before you read the results... as you read through my findings ask yourself if you think anything has changed over the last 5 years. And if you think it has, I'd love for you to post your thoughts on the message board. This will allow for an interesting conversation to begin and it will offer me direction for my future articles.

Highlights of the National Youth Worker Survey

Education & Training

Education completed:

- 49% had college or university degrees
- 29% had Masters degrees
- 2% had earned doctorates

Perceived value of *formal* vs. *informal* education:

- 43% highly valued their *formal* education in preparing them for youth ministry
- 86% highly valued their *informal* education in preparing them for youth ministry

What was your **best** source of training for youth ministry?

- 62% stated *personal experience* was best
- 10% said it came from a *mentor / discipler*
- only 7% said it came from *college or seminary*

In what areas do you need additional training?

- #1 - recruiting & training volunteers
- #2 - how to disciple students
- #3 - working with parents
- #4 - counseling students

Personal & Spiritual Life

When did you become a Christian?

- 83% before the age of 18
- 12% between ages 19-25
- 5% after the age of 26

How satisfied are you with your spiritual disciplines of prayer and study?

- 56% were dissatisfied

What are the top four reasons that you might leave ministry?

- #1 - overwork
- #2 - church politics
- #3 - frustration
- #4 - discouragement

How much does ministry discourage you?

- 52% said they experience "discouragement feelings" **often**

How much does comparison to other ministries and youth workers effect you?

- 63% said comparison had *little* to *very little* effect on them

How satisfied are you with the significant peer friendships you now have?

- 59% responded that they are satisfied with the number of significant friendship they have

Networking & Mentoring

Are you presently involved in a local network of youth pastors?

- 46% of respondents said they were
- 31% said they once were
- 23% never have been

What impact have mentors or spiritual leaders had on your effectiveness?

- 77% said mentors increased their effectiveness **a lot**
- 80% said having a mentor is **very important to them**
- 73% said they were **interested** in on-line consulting/coaching services

Future of Student Ministry

What do you see as the top characteristics of student ministry in the future?

- Small group based
- Student led
- Prayer driven
- On campus

Observations

In the 1970's effective training in the area of student ministry was difficult to find. Bible colleges didn't offer majors in the field, and seminaries were usually offering just a single class in their Masters of Christian Education program. Today aspiring youth workers can choose from well over twenty colleges and universities that offer majors in youth ministry. And today many seminaries offer a variety of graduate degrees in student ministry. When we add to this the existence of over ten great national parachurch youth organizations that offer excellent training, and the fact that most denominations have established full time youth ministry departments to train and support their youth ministers, you can see that things have turned in the favor of the apprentice youth worker.

So what do we have here? Today there are more full-time, life long, well trained, and totally focused youth workers who are sold out to love the kids of the world. Sounds great, uh?!

This is great but there are a couple of interesting ramifications to it. One fascinating and obvious dynamic is surfacing as more and more people commit to doing youth work longer and longer. Do you know what it is? Unlike any other time in history we have youth workers *facing the reality of aging* and the challenge of negotiating *life process issues*.

Here's a news flash . . . life is different in your 40's & 50's than it is in your 20's & 30's. It's around 40 years of age when we begin to recognize that any emotional debts we've accrued must be paid back. It's also around 40 when any unresolved childhood issues tend to surface and demand our attention. And it's around 40 when people start to feel tired, very tired. Isn't it a shame that just when you begin to know something, you are just too tired to care? Remember, thousands and thousands of youth workers are between 32 and 45, and mid-life is either just around the corner or facing them today.

I believe that the challenge and trauma of mid-life is an amazing and important prerequisite for intensifying a youth pastors effectiveness during the second half of his or her ministry career. Let me tell you why. Things are no longer like they were twenty-five years ago in student ministry. The focus of youth ministry twenty-five years ago was to **win, train**, and then **send** students. Today I wish it were that easy. The emotional damage that modern living has inflicted upon kids today is overwhelming. As my good friend Dawson McAllister said recently, "Today we must **win, heal, train**, and then **send** students out into the world to be salt and light for the kingdom of God." Did you notice the added step needed in student ministry today? We must **heal** students today.

The survey turned up the fact that it's emotionally tiring and discouraging doing the work of youth ministry. No doubt that is more true today than twenty-five years ago because of the needs present in wounded kids. How do we step into the pain of a youth culture gone mad? I think we do it in the later years by first stepping into our own pain as we age. There is something wonderful, it's actually a severe mercy that the Lord grants to us, as we sit at the feet of our own pain during mid-life.

Listen, the first half of ministry is all about our energy, abilities and strategy. The second half of ministry is about our *inner lives, i.e. who we are as people*. Ministry in the second half comes out of who we are, not just what we can do to wow kids. Depth is where it's at for those who hang in through the difficult years of mid-life. Do you see how all of us who are aging just may be positioning our selves for our most effective days?

Forward thinking people must be considering a couple of important questions that this raises. Who will offer training and help to those who are facing mid-life issues as a youth worker? And what structure or system can be set up to utilize the great wisdom and experience of veteran youth workers who are getting tired of doing ministry in the trenches? I think the door is wide open for new level of mentoring relationships to begin between the gray haired youth worker and the young wannabe.

It was very apparent in the survey that young youth workers both want and benefit from their exposure to older, more experienced mentors. As a matter of fact, I recognized a pattern in the ministry development of youth workers as I led many focus groups. It seems that everyone *begins* his or her youth ministry career by learning a basic strategy of student ministry. It usually takes hearing a basic strategy twice before a young youth leader really begins to understand and apply what they've learned. There are at least ten different organizations training youth workers today in basically the same philosophy of discipleship, evangelism, and campus ministry. But the difference comes, not in what young youth pastors know, but in how effectively they implement what's learned. Implementation occurs at various rates.

I wanted to know what facilitates quick implementation. What I learned as I talked to leaders, and reflected on my own experience in my early years, is that those who had *mentors* in the first couple years of ministry implemented their strategy *three times faster*. The men and women I talked to could not overemphasize what it meant to have a mentor available to them in the first few scary years. Those who did benefited greatly, those who didn't, still struggle.

Now think about this, there are thousands of graying youth workers around the country that have years and years of experience. Wouldn't it be great if someone would create a network that would allow for mentoring and spiritual fathering or mothering to happen? If this were to happen frustrations could be intercepted, support established, friendship enhanced, and hard learned wisdom imparted.

We can be sure from the survey that the future of student ministry is about small groups, healing kids, campus ministry led by students, and prayer. On a leadership level, the next ten years will be about keeping youth workers in the game. To do that we must help the aging youth worker deal with their life process and connect them with those younger who can benefit from their life experience. If we do this, the church will have the answer for a generation gone crazy, and the answer will be found in the lives of it's leaders.