

# Markers of Youth Ministry Success

## Success Mile-Marker #1

You know you're a success in youth ministry when teenagers take you for granted and fail to appreciate all you do.

This one might sound strange, but when you parallel your youth ministry to Christ's experience with his disciples, it makes sense. In fact, they often seemed unimpressed by the sacrifices Jesus made to minister among them. They were quick to fall asleep when he asked them to pray, quick to lose their tempers when he didn't give them their way, and quick to act like they didn't even know him when they were threatened.

Discipleship is a love-hate relationship. We can't significantly impact our students unless we spend time with them. Yet the more time we spend with them, the more they take us for granted. As in the New Testament, the 12 in Christ's "youth group" weren't too impressed with him either—at least not until his Father moved him to a new location.

## Success Mile-Marker #2

You know you're a success when you've been in one place long enough to have "remember when" stories.

Persistence is the greatest revenge on hell. In our dysfunctional society, where complete family units are an endangered species, we can define successful youth ministry with three words: Just be there. Sounds simple, but in a world of "rotating relationships" a long-haul ministry can't be overrated.

Conversations about the "night the bus engine caught on fire four years ago coming home from our fall retreat" are key markers of success, as long as you're consciously creating new memories today. It's dangerous to recycle the same stories over and over in your mind. I've been in full-time ministry for more than three decades, and I still push myself to generate fresh stories. Without fresh stories, I won't have a fresh heart. I fear that I might stand before Christ one day with an enlarged youth ministry but a shrunken heart.

Over time, youth ministry can degenerate into a boring, unfulfilling task even to the best of us. It takes sheer determination to create new stories with new kids. I recently led a student named CJ to the Lord—he's my fresh story in the making. With God's help, I'm determined to authentically befriend CJ so one day he can write his own stories in the lives of students.

## Success Mile-Marker #3

You know you're a success when you fight to remain a voice, not an echo.

There are many echoes in youth ministry—people who merely mimic the culture's values rather than fight to be a distinct voice for biblical values. I'm not talking about legalism or nitpicking about music styles or body piercing here. I'm talking about being a prophetic voice in the lives of our young people—a voice that has something to say about character, conscience, and conviction. It requires no energy or backbone to simply echo what kids want to hear.

John the Baptist is a good example-he ignored the pressure to conform and lived out his calling instead. That's why he's immortalized in the New Testament as a "voice of one crying in the wilderness." Some youth leaders settle for having a ministry of success, but truly successful youth leaders choose to have a ministry of significance.

This slow slide into echo-land is like a youth leader traveling aboard a huge ocean liner. As she stands on the deck and looks out on the ocean, the ship appears to stand still. But if she dropped a large buoy from the ship's deck, she'd quickly realize just how fast the ship was moving. The buoy would quickly disappear on the horizon. In the same way, it's easy for us to assume our values have remained unchanged when they're really slipping away, unnoticed.

In our culture, the only absolute is that there are no absolutes. Our challenge is to remain a fixed point in a sea of mediocrity; a fixed point that's committed to remaining a true voice to young people. After all, our Boss was once described as "the same yesterday, today, and forever."

I was the last one out of the building the night of the Legacy service\*the clock read 4:30 a.m. as the last student said his final farewell. Exhausted, I trudged my way up the steps to the door one last time. I paused at the top and cast a fond glance back at the room that represented the epicenter of 13 years of youth ministry. Was I afraid to walk out? Not in the least.

You see, I began preparing for my exit the very day I made my entrance. Through the years, I tried to make sure that my desire to be needed was never greater than my desire to be exceeded.