

»» problems and other life questions. He probed my faith discoveries and responded respectfully to my insights. Meanwhile, my Sunday school teacher and Bible study leader Bruce pursued me with focused attention, and seemed always ready to spend time listening to me. I owe them (and many others) a debt I can only repay by heeding Christ's words, "Do unto others."

I see myself in so many of the young people who surround me. They need guides—mentors who will walk with them through their tumultuous teenage years. I can't stand by while they attempt that journey alone. And I have a passion for raising up well-prepared, intelligent, and spiritually mature leaders in my community, nation, and world. You don't get people like that unless the "redwood farmers" in the community do their jobs.

### 3. REPENT OF YOUR FALSE MINISTRY MOTIVATIONS.

In a calling that has many demands and few tangible rewards, wrong motivations will put you on the fast track to burnout. Over the last two-plus decades of ministry, I've sometimes had to catch myself, and then repent from operating out of false or cloaked motivations. For example...

● **I'm not in youth ministry to find the fountain of youth.** It's embarrassing to have to say this, but nothing stops the enemy advance of creaky joints and an aching lower back. Every time I play a physically active game, I'm reminded of just how old I

am. That doesn't mean I stop playing—I just accept my limits and occasionally brag about my injuries. But the real quality of my youth ministry has little to do with my physical limitations. Today I'm less tempted to focus on big, busy activities and more set on discerning kids' spiritual and emotional needs and responding to them. I practice a slower, more person-centered ministry. And I don't wear down as quickly.

Years ago I watched a video that featured a bunch of youth group members lauding one of their adult leaders as a fun, caring, and insightful mentor to them. Then I saw the guy—he was a man in his 70s whose "job" was to hang out with these kids and help out wherever he could. I'd like that to be me in another 25 years.

● **I'm not in youth ministry to (surprise) gain fame and fortune with my catchphrase-worthy programs and magic touch for changing lives.** Of all high school seniors who play football, just one in 17 will go on to play in college. Of those, one in 50 will get drafted by a National Football League team. That means that approximately 0.09 percent of high school senior boys who play football will eventually be drafted by an NFL team. Those statistics sound about right for youth ministers who are hoping to make a name for themselves. Fame and fortune are likely not headed down the highway toward you. And if you do taste them, they probably won't last.

● **I'm not in youth ministry as a stepping stone to adult** »»

You can't live without

it

## I MUST REPENT OF MY DESIRE TO FIX WHAT TEENAGERS' CULTURE AND THEIR PARENTS HAVE MESSED UP. EVEN JESUS COULDN'T DO THAT, AT LEAST NOT IN HIS FIRST COMING.

» ministry. My purpose in youth work can't be to prepare me for an adult ministry position. If that's my goal, I pitifully misunderstand the nonhierarchical nature of ministry in God's kingdom.

However, youth work does prepare you for working with adult leaders in the church. Your experience with junior highers may develop skills you need to work with trustees and church board members who can't focus on what's important, who won't listen to your wisdom, and who sabotage your best efforts. I've often used youth ministry exercises to open administrative meetings and remind the group of its purpose, goals, and the necessity of teamwork. I know if I can deal with arguing 14-year-olds, I can deal with aggravated adults.

● I'm not in youth ministry to "fix" kids who've suffered from negative cultural and parental influences. I must repent of my desire to fix what teenagers' culture and their parents have messed up. Even Jesus couldn't do that, at least not in his first coming. At best, I can help them resist the pervasive evil influences around them.

To make it long term in youth ministry, I dare not listen to the voices that cry out, "Keep those young people off the street and out of trouble!" That's so beneath my true calling. Whose goals are those, anyway? People who don't like teenagers, mostly. I'm in this for and with young people, right where they're at.

### 4. REFRESH YOUR BODY AND SPIRIT...JUST DO IT!

Youth ministry responsibilities burn lots of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. Over time, this energy drain makes us restless, weary, and worn out—unless we've refreshed our bodies and spirits. When I'm on the verge of burnout, it's usually because I haven't sought refreshment for my body and spirit. Without lots of external support and internal reinforcement, I'm doomed as a youth leader.

● I must maintain a private spiritual life, growing in relationship with God. My times of Scripture reading, study, and contemplation are vital.

● I must join in corporate worship, fellowship, and service beyond what I do with the youth group. Sometimes I visit another church or attend a concert just to offer praise and hear God's Word in a new way.

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## USING AND MISUSING SCRIPTURE

After a quarter-century of youth ministry, I've learned something about the power of Scripture. I've seen it used well and badly. Even Satan used Scripture as a justification for his temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. God's Word must impact me before I expect it to impact my kids.

1. I need to have non-ministry-related Bible study time. In fact, it's crucial to examine passages that I'll (probably) never use with my youth, just to let them do their work within me.

2. I've got to gauge whether the Bible lessons I've planned really speak to my heart, mind, and soul before I "inflict" them on my kids. Before I can authentically teach those lessons, I must let my Teacher teach them to me.

3. I must guard against using Scripture as a blunt instrument to pound home my own biases. I must seek to present the whole counsel of God's Word, not just the parts I understand or feel comfortable exploring.

4. I dare not reduce my presentation of the Bible to a few repetitive themes. My job is not to serve the same spiritual dish every week; my role is to discern my students' specific spiritual dietary needs and offer them the biblical nutrition they need.

