

treating kids like adults

If you really want your group to grow in depth and breadth, shift your focus to challenge them more deeply.

by matt conner

A week before I headed off to college, I went to my last youth group meeting—I remember it vividly. We did our usual stuff, including:

- An egg relay.
- A 10-minute devotion about Jonah and the whale.
- A couple of icebreakers.
- Cookies and juice.
- Announcements about our upcoming car wash fund-raiser.

Seven days later I was a college freshman. Right off, some upperclassmen invited me to a local campus ministry. I quickly accepted the invitation, unaware of the culture shock I was about to experience. The gathering started with 30 minutes of intense worship, leading into a 45-minute message that was the fourth in a series on "Developing Your Passion For Christ," followed by announcements about community service projects and small groups. The whole thing stunned me. My high school and college ministry experiences were so foundationally different that I didn't know how to respond.

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I'm now a youth pastor myself, and the memory of that senior-to-freshman disconnect now drives my ministry to teenagers. I don't think we challenge our teenagers enough. We're like lifeguards teaching kids to swim in the ocean by offering them lessons in a wading pool.

I think most youth pastors would agree that one of our biggest frustrations is spiritually shallow students. But I've learned a great truth: *No matter how high or low I set the bar of expectations, my students will rise to it.* If I don't challenge my teenagers to grow beyond an activity-centered faith level, they'll hit whatever mark I do set for them.

So I'm working to cultivate a more fertile spiritual foundation in my ministry, and the key is treating teenagers more like adults than children.

transitioning my own spiritual habits

The buck stops with me. Sooner or later, my own spiritual habits always

pull up or drag down my kids. So when I set about working to build higher expectations in my ministry, I had to start with myself. I challenged kids to seek God for direction, dig more deeply into the Bible, and reach their friends for Christ *after* I renewed my commitment to living these disciplines myself.

transitioning my ministry

Once I started living what I expected my students to embrace, I began revamping our ministry philosophy. I started by communicating to my kids, adult leaders, and the church that our same-old trajectory was about to change. I asked myself and other stakeholders some key questions.

- What do we want our youth group meeting to look like six months or a year from now?
- What are elements in our meeting that need to be changed or even discarded?
- What do we hope discipleship will look like?

We talked, prayed, and ruminated on these questions for months. I planned focus groups with volunteers, parents, and students. In each case, we brainstormed answers to the questions, then added new insights to a growing list.

We loaded up key people and traveled to

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other churches to learn what they were doing to deepen kids' commitment to and understanding of biblical truth. We used these real-life models as discussion starters. We also interviewed a handful of unchurched students to unearth what it would take to attract them into our ministry (and what was currently driving them from it). As we gathered all these discussions into one "pot," we prayed and prayed some more.

transitioning my methods

After brainstorming and praying, we were ready to launch some tangible changes to the ministry.

● **Move from lessons to messages.** We determined to transition from an activity-driven ministry to a challenge-driven ministry. My students were used to meetings dominated by game playing. So to kick off our transition to a deep-end ministry, I attempted to wow them with a 30-minute message on repentance. Stupid mistake! I was yawned out of the room.

On Monday morning I dragged myself into the office, dejected and confused. But I was determined to make the transition. We developed a plan to stair-step kids to greater degrees of challenge. I started by planning and delivering 10- to 12-minute deeper messages that promoted interaction among students, slowly increasing the length every month or so. Within a year, the message portion of our meeting had transformed from a "groaner" to something kids were inviting their friends to hear. Newcomers often told me they were thrilled to listen to something that wasn't "dumbed down" for them.

● **Let's make learning experiential.** We decided to act on what researchers and some youth ministry experts already knew¹—whenever you make learning an experience, your kids will retain more truths. So I recruited student leaders to help me brainstorm ways to make every learning time or message an experiential learning experience. I told them about my upcoming message series, then asked them to come up with ideas to make it experiential.

For example, for a four-week series about sin and its consequences, we asked a nurse in our congregation to get us several baby ID bracelets from the local hospital. The first week of the series, we gave each student a bracelet and asked them to write the word "sin" in the blank. Then we

challenged them to wear the bracelets for one week before cutting them off at the next youth group meeting.

Dozens of students took us up on the challenge—they came back the next week with unbelievable insights on the topic. Their experiences paved the way for some great discussions on sin—how it's enticing, undermining, and destructive.

● **Let's train kids, not just teach them.** In an effort to help kids really "get it," we decided to give them opportunities to practice what we were preaching. How often do we encourage kids to pray but forget to give them challenging opportunities to do it?²

So, when we did a series on the Christian disciplines, we gave kids a chance to train for each one. For example, when we taught on the discipline of journaling, we saved the bulk of the meeting time to hand out journals to kids, then have them write about their experience of God at that moment in their life. Another time, we taught on service for three weeks, then did a full week of community service. The point is to simply ask ourselves: "How can these students actively practice what we're learning about tonight? Is it possible to have them practice right here?"

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I'd like to emphasize that a transition of this scale must take place slowly—I learned the hard way! Our goal is for our graduating seniors to not only feel well-prepared for post-youth-group life, but to step onto their college campuses (or into the work world) as spiritual leaders. ■



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chanting, kneeling, and depth-starved kids

by amy lepine

It's pop quiz time, so pick the hottest youth group trend...

- A. Dating games and *Survivor* contests.
- B. Extreme sports and lock-ins.
- C. Toilet bowl scrubbing and silent meditation.

If you picked C, you're either not taking my pop quiz seriously, or you know something about kids' growing fascination with Taize,³ a nondenominational community located in a small village in eastern France, where visitors and members practice age-old orthodox spiritual disciplines.

Taize draws thousands of pilgrims each week during the summer months. They represent all ages, nationalities, and denominations. They come to join in the communal life for a week or more, participating in prayers three times a day and completing chores to help the community run.

3 For more information on Taize, go to www.taize.fr.

1 A must-have resource for learning about the power of experiential learning in youth ministry is Thom and Joani Schultz's *The Dirt On Learning* (Group Publishing). The Schultzes use the parable of the sower as a metaphor and example of deep learning and spiritual growth. For more information on the book, go to www.groupmag.com and click on Resources, then click on Leadership Strategies.

2 Teenagers and young adults all over the world have been responding to the 24-7 prayer challenge. Started in Britain by a youth leader, the movement has now spread all over the world, with young people committing to pray 24 hours a day in two-person shifts. For more information about 24-7 prayer, and for help in starting your own prayer "boiler room," go to www.24-7prayer.com.