

I wrote this several years ago for the 'UK Church growth digest'.

A 'new' approach to youth ministry!

I am in youth ministry almost by accident. It all came about because of a lecturer at the Bible College I went to years ago. I was told that working for a church was "part of your education and will help sharpen your ministry skills." In no time at all, I took the plunge and found a church that was desperate for a youth leader.

Now you must realise that I didn't really have a clue as to how to run a Christian youth group. I knew what I wanted to achieve. I wanted to run a healthy Christian group that reached out to the local kids in the community. I decided to find some 'experts' and ask their advice. They were very helpful. They told me to run a group on a Friday night with an hour or so of games and activities and then try and have a bible study, prayer and some small groups. I made a trek to the local Christian bookstore. I found dozens of books on games and activities designed to produce an evening of way out, crazy, wacky, wild fun.

The day came to begin running the youth group. In no time it was a raging success. We had a tight program of an hour of fun and games, a short talk and then discussion groups followed by supper and another game to finish off the evening. For two years the group grew and grew. We started with eight kids and at the end had almost 30 young people who were devoted to the Friday night fellowship.

At the end of two years, it was time to move on. I had decided to take a job in another part of town to gain some different ministry experience. Soon after I left however, there were troubles. The new leader didn't have an American accent and the games weren't as fun. Many left. The group, which numbered 30 soon, dropped to half a dozen or so.

It always makes me sad when I think about the group. Why didn't they stay with the Christian faith? They had such a good time each Friday night?

This is the beginning of my story. Fortunately this is not the end. A few years later found myself in as the youth minister in a much bigger church with a very different style of youth ministry. I had always been taught that the role of a youth group was to reach the non-Christian. That is, we were there for outreach. This being the case, we would spend most of our time doing what we were supposed to do- reach out. We would have fun, crazy activities designed to entertain anyone who was new. We would then have a short time in God's Word. This was to bring a commitment, make them curious or to promote discussion. Our strategy was simple, use fun and entertainment to bring the outsider to our group. I like to think of this as an 'outside in' approach to youth ministry.

This new church I went to had a radically different philosophy. While they loved the non-Christian and desperately wanted to reach them, they worked 'inside out'. That is, they spent most of their time building up the Christian person in the youth group to be strong. We spent a lot of time learning from the Bible. We did this in the main gathering and in weekly small groups. We spent time in worship and prayer. We worked on loving each other and trying to be holy. While the weekly meeting always had a bit of an evangelistic edge, it was mainly committed to 'spurring each other on to love and good deeds'.

The amazing thing I found was that this youth group grew and grew. Young people were fired up to love Jesus. This led them to witness to their friends at school. When their friends came to the youth group, they didn't come expecting to be entertained. They came because their friends had told them about Jesus and their relationship with him was clearly evident from their behavior. In the space of eight years, the group almost tripled. We also found that our 'stick rate' was much higher. When someone made a commitment, they usually really meant it. We didn't keep everyone, but we were doing much, much better than my previous group.

Well believe it or not, I took a lot of criticism for my work at this church. The criticism was mainly of the variety of, 'This style of youth ministry will only work with wealthy, educated young people'. (This was the demographic of the suburb).

My wife and I decided to take the challenge. We moved to another suburb almost an hour away. We went to Sydney's 'Western Suburbs'. To get there you drive west from the heart of town and keep driving. After about 45 minutes you are in the 'heartland of working class suburbia'!

. It is a part of town with many in government housing and on government benefits. It has all the typical problems associated with a middle to lower middle class setting: marital breakdown, unemployment etc. One of our claims to fame is the local high school is the only one in Sydney with a day care center! The neighboring suburb to my own boasts in the fact that no one will deliver the local newspaper for fear of being mugged.

We have been here now for 31/2 years. The first year was typically back breaking stuff. Our job was to turn a youth group around from a fortnightly 'drop in games parlor' into a group of young people who loved Jesus and were effective in reaching out to their friends for Him. We knew that if we were to be successful in reach the countless local kids we must make some radical changes. We did three things: 1. We changed the meeting from Friday night to Sunday afternoon before the evening church service. We introduced elements to the program such as memory verses, prayer, testimonies and eventually, singing. We also split the group according to age. The younger group met Sunday morning, the older group Sunday evening. 2. We began small group Bible studies that meet each week in our home. We divided the group up into four smaller groups. These four groups began to meet each week to promote solid godly relationships and a to have healthy time in the word of God. It is interesting to note that these have been a great 'front door' to growth. We see more new kids come to small groups than to anything else we run. I guess they love the warmth and good relationships that are present. 3. We began to have a number of camps or to promote Christian community.

Our aim was to teach the regulars in the group to live as a light for Jesus in their schools and homes. After many long months, some of the young people began to try and be more like Jesus and less like Britney Spears

I have to be honest success was not immediate. It too around a year and a half to see any results. Straight away the group dropped from around 16 to less than 10. Those who stayed however began to be switched on. The real turning point came when God did three great things for us. One of our most difficult members of the group, a young man with an extremely troubled background became a Christian. A few weeks later he raised his hand in youth group and asked if, "We could pray for his friend Chris. He didn't know Jesus and that's no good!" It was an awesome moment. For the first time ever, the group began to have an outward focus because of their commitment to the King.

The next thing God did was to bring a miracle to the junior group each Sunday morning. My wife and I were finding it hard going. Four youth in the group, none of them were particularly excited to be there. .One Sunday three new kids walked in- Mal, Kristie and Sarah. They looked at me casually and said, "Can we come in?" Confused, I mumbled something incoherent and pointed to some chairs. They joined in the program, loved it and said, "Can we come back next week?" After coming to I found out that Mal and Kristie (brother and sister) had been thinking about God, the bible, and typical truth of the universe stuff They decide that they should go talk to the local Anglican minister and get baptized. Trev (our minister) told them that they had to go to youth group for three weeks. It was the next Sunday they showed up. They dragged Sarah (a friend) along for good measure.

They have been coming to the group ever since. They have been baptised, brought along a couple of friends, go to bible study every week and, completely transformed the group! Soon we had over twelve kids who came each week and the atmosphere was great

That is where my journey has brought me. If I can share any words of wisdom, It is this. Build up the core regular kids. Fire them up to love Jesus and to take his word seriously. Run a group that helps them to live as followers of Jesus in this blinded world. Help them to be salt and light in this dead world.