

HOW TO BE
THE BEST
VOLUNTEER YOUTH WORKER
IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

KURT JOHNSTON

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Dedicated to Paul Dempster

You've traveled to Hong Kong to help train youth workers.

You've patiently put up with me as a junior high small group coleader.

You've opened your home countless times.

You've paid for students to go to camp.

You've 'Zoomed' with students for more than FIFTY nights in a row during the global pandemic of 2020.

Paul, you have gone above and beyond for years and our youth ministry is better because of you!

You are, without a doubt, the second-greatest volunteer youth worker in the history of the world. Who's number one? You should know...you're married to her!

An Introduction

Not long ago I was speaking to a group of teenagers when I said, “You know, I’m of the opinion that being really good at stuff is overrated!” At the time, we were in the middle of an event dedicated to helping teens get excited about using their gifts to make a difference in the world. That message is at the heart of much of youth ministry. The world is rife with opportunities for young people to step up, step out, and step into various chances to contribute. But teenagers are often hesitant to do so because they are afraid they won’t get it right; they fear they’ll fumble the ball or drop it completely. They’ve bought into the lie that unless you can be really good at something, it’s not worth the effort. I have a different opinion. I think being really good is, very often, overrated. The effort is what counts! And that’s what I wanted to convey to teenagers with my simple statement.

Of course, there are exceptions. I’m glad my surgeon is really good at surgeon stuff. When my wife and I decided to hire a professional to paint the interior of our house, we wouldn’t have been satisfied with somebody who sucked at painting but put in a good effort. Sometimes being really good at stuff is actually really good!

Enter youth ministry. Enter you. You might be a veteran youth worker, or reading this book might be your first foray into the world of ministry to teenagers. Either way, I’m glad you are taking the time to read about youth ministry and how you can be really good at it...maybe even the best volunteer youth worker in the history of the world! That bold claim is impossible to substantiate. But like I said earlier, there are times when being really good at stuff is actually really good. I think that’s true of youth ministry. Getting better at youth ministry is worth the effort because teenagers are worth the effort. I think you believe that, too, which is why you picked up this little book in the first place.

Thanks for volunteering in what I believe is the most important

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ministry in the church! Thanks for stepping into a ministry that most adults run from! Thanks for believing teenagers are worth the effort!

I hope this little book helps you become really good at youth ministry....maybe even the best volunteer youth worker in the history of the world! Hey, somebody has to claim that title, why not you?

How This Book Works. It's Quite Simple:

- There are ten topics, broken into ten chapters
- Each chapter starts with a quick intro
- That's followed by the "Three Biggies in a Box"
- Those are followed by an explanation of each "Biggie"
- Each chapter has a sidebar written by an amazing volunteer youth worker
- Read this book in order, or jump around
- When you are finished, you will be well on your way to becoming the best volunteer youth worker in the history of the world

CHAPTER 1

KEEP JESUS AT THE CENTER

A few years ago I had a sobering experience. I was conducting about a dozen interviews with teenagers who had grown up in our youth ministry and now wanted to be summer interns. For the most part, these college-aged young adults had once been considered core members of our youth group, claimed to have a strong faith, and felt called to ministry. They were the cream of the crop. At some point in every interview, I would ask the candidate to talk to me about Jesus. When did they become a Christ-follower? How would they tell others about him? Why is a relationship with Christ so important? What sets Jesus apart from other religious figures in history? This was where the wheels began to fall off the cart. Across the board, with only a few exceptions, the cream of our youth ministry crop—college students called to ministry—couldn't formulate articulate responses to what seemed like fairly simple inquiries. I was shocked. They loved God, loved the local church, loved youth ministry, and loved Jesus. Yet they knew very little about him and could barely verbalize what they did know. Yikes!

What does my eye-opening moment have to do with your youth ministry role at your church? A ton.

One of the most important responsibilities of the youth worker is to be a role model; a mentor. At its core, youth work is about

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building relationships with teenagers and helping them grow and maintain a relationship with Jesus. And because of that, it's vital that youth ministries be chock-full of adults who each have a vibrant, fresh, mature, and growing walk with Christ themselves. The formal programs your youth group offers are important pieces of the puzzle, but too often too much trust is placed in those programs. When functioning at their best, programs (Sunday school, mid-week gatherings, small groups, student leadership teams, camps, events, etc.) mostly serve as vehicles to get adults and teenagers interacting. The programs set the table for relational youth ministry. Our youth ministry had put too much faith in our programs and assumed the awesome programs were doing an awesome job of developing well-rounded, confident followers of Jesus. The interviews with our potential interns who had grown up under our roof proved otherwise. Programs are pointless unless they help connect teenagers with "Jesus-freaky" adults!



IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

YOU + JESUS + TEENAGER = GOOD MINISTRY

LIVE AND LEAD LIKE JESUS

It's All About Jesus

Ultimately, every church youth group is in the business of introducing teenagers to Jesus. How that looks from group to group varies based on a host of factors such as theology, methodology, personal bent of the leader of the youth ministry, etc. But if your ministry doesn't have pointing students to Jesus as its ultimate goal, it may as well be a YMCA. Don't get me wrong, I love the YMCA. But it isn't supposed to be a church, or vice versa.

So what did we do when we realized our youth ministry wasn't pointing teenagers to Jesus the way we assumed it was? Well, we're still working on it, but we started by deciding to infuse Jesus into every possible aspect of our ministry. We immediately made three changes that helped ensure that Jesus was always the "True North"

of our ministry:

1. We added Jesus to our purpose statement and changed our in-house youth ministry training and strategy to begin with, “Our ministry has Jesus as its center.” Until then it had been assumed that everybody knew Jesus was our focus, but the reality is that while he was in the picture, he wasn’t front and center.
2. We determined to move from a mentality of “...and, Jesus” (doing a bunch of good stuff AND adding Jesus into the mix) to one of “Jesus, and...” (starting with Jesus as the center and adding other stuff into the mix). Semantics? Perhaps. But sometimes how we say things makes all the difference.
3. We coined an intentionally controversial new phrase: “Less God; More Jesus.” If that phrase has you scratching your head or makes you wonder what seminary I attended... it’s done its job! Let me briefly explain. While interviewing our potential interns, I quickly realized that they all loved God and believed God was the answer to most of what ails humankind. In the interviews, there was much “God talk” and almost no mention of Jesus until I brought him into the conversation, and then they couldn’t articulate much about him. My takeaway: Many church kids know a lot about God but not nearly enough about Jesus. Most unchurched teenagers aren’t atheists, but have a belief in, and even an appreciation of, “God.” The generic “god” that shows up from religion to religion is, for the most part, a welcomed and appreciated concept. Despite various efforts, removing “In God We Trust” from U.S. currency has failed time and time again. Why? Generally speaking, Americans like God. But collectively we know very little about Jesus. So our youth ministry decided that whenever we could, and whenever it made sense, we would substitute “God talk” for “Jesus talk,” or at the very least insert Jesus language into virtually every aspect of our ministry, from the messages to the casual conversations.

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I have to admit that writing this first little section has been embarrassing. I have the privilege of leading what is widely considered one of the most successful and influential youth ministries in the world, but under my watch we were failing to do the most important thing a youth group is supposed to do. We failed to make sure it was ALL about Jesus.

You + Jesus + Teenager = Good Youth Ministry

It's been said that leaders are learners, and I tend to agree. As a volunteer youth leader, you need to have the mindset of being a lifelong learner, continuously sharpening the saw. And toward that end there are a myriad of conferences, workshops, blogs, podcasts, and books that can help you hone your youth ministry understanding and skills. Keep learning! But don't overthink it. Youth ministry isn't rocket science and you don't need a seminary degree to be an incredible youth worker.

In our setting we constantly remind our team of the recipe, or equation, for good youth ministry: Caring Adult + Jesus + Teenager = Good Youth Ministry. It can't be that simple, can it? Yes! Put most simply, youth ministry is about adults who love Jesus allowing their lives to intersect with teenagers' lives, with the hope of pointing those teenagers toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus.

When I was in junior high, I attended a tiny youth group that consisted of exactly three of us: me, my best friend Mike Pace, and a girl (sorry, girl, I can't remember your name). Our youth "room" was large enough to fit a three-cushion couch for the three of us and a chair for our leader, John Miller, to sit in. John was in his mid-twenties and newly married, and he grinded out long, physical days in a blue-collar job. He had no formal ministry training, he was rarely prepared to teach the lesson, and he had no clue how to answer about 99% of our questions. But John LOVED Jesus. He was constantly talking about Jesus and the impact he'd made on John's young marriage, and his outlook at work and life in general. The guy wouldn't shut up about Jesus! Additionally,

John seemed to genuinely care about me, Mike, and the girl (sorry again, girl). He and his wife would invite us over to their apartment for swim parties, he'd show up at my football games, and he even bought an extra dirt bike so he could take me and Mike motorcycle riding.

John moved when we were in eighth grade and I quit attending church. The next three years or so proved to be the toughest, rowdiest, most regrettable years of my life. It wasn't until my junior year in high school that somebody reached out and invited me to another youth group in town. The only reason I was open to going was that I remembered a guy named John Miller who really loved Jesus and truly cared about me, Mike, and the girl (once again, sorry, girl). A few months after returning to church I gave my life to Christ. The reality is that John Miller did most of the heavy lifting. The love he had for Jesus and the way he allowed his life to intersect with mine were preparing my heart to be open to the gospel years later. My story is a living example of Jesus's parable of the four soils. John was working hard, plowing away at hard soil, softening it into soil that would someday be receptive to the seed another youth worker would sow.

Today, the youth ministry I help lead meets in a 50,000 square foot facility and has all the bells and whistles a youth group could ever hope for. We've got basketball courts, a skate park, a sand volleyball court, pool tables, lights, cameras, and action...gosh, we've got a lot of action.

And NONE of it is required to make good youth ministry happen!

The only things required to make good youth ministry happen are YOU + JESUS + TEENAGER.

It was good enough for John Miller way back in 1980, and it's good enough for you today.

Live And Lead Like Jesus

Teenagers are coming of age in a world that, generally speaking, is less open-minded about faith than the one you and I grew up in. Christianity is misrepresented and misunderstood (we've largely got ourselves to blame for that, but I digress). Men and women of faith are increasingly expected to sit down, shut up, and keep their beliefs to themselves. Because of this, the teenagers in your youth group need to see adults living a "loud and proud" life of faith. I'm not suggesting you go grab a bullhorn and head to the streets, or that being loud and proud means being obnoxious, arrogant, and smug. I'm simply suggesting that the teens in your youth group desperately need to see adult men and women who are proud of their faith, who allow their walk with Jesus to influence their lives in tangible ways. If you live as a closeted Christian, why would the teenagers you lead live any differently?

You probably remember the old WWJD bracelets. The bracelets have long gone out of style, but I think there are still some fair questions for adult followers of Jesus to ask themselves regularly, in addition to "What would Jesus do?":

- What would Jesus say?
- What would Jesus value?
- Who would Jesus seek out?
- Who would Jesus speak up for?
- How would Jesus respond?

As a volunteer youth worker, you are a role model. The apostle Paul's admonishment to "follow me as I follow Christ" is one we should aspire to as well. Our walk of faith—our journey with Jesus—should serve as an example to the teenagers in our youth ministries.

Side note: Being an example doesn't mean you're perfect. Life is messy and following Jesus doesn't automatically make it cleaner. One of the most effective ways to live and lead like Jesus is to do so in the midst of the mess and the muck. How you bounce back

after a setback, how you navigate pain, loss, and disappointment, and how you stay faithful to Christ in the darkest of seasons are all vital to model to your teens.

THOUGHTS FROM A VOLUNTEER

by Teresa Genoway



Having become a Christian in my teenage years, I quickly mastered what I thought life with Christ should look like: obeying the rules and doing good to others. This was easy for me, as I am a rule-follower at heart. Little did I realize my black-and-white thinking served as a poor witness of Christ to others because it communicated a lot of judgment with little love. Later, a crisis in my personal life put me on a path to recovery from legalistic Christianity—a journey of loving Jesus with all of my being. My whole life changed as I learned to be a Jesus-follower, not a rule-follower. This has impacted how I shepherd the teenagers under my care. I don't want them to just know the Bible, I want them to know Jesus.

No matter what topic we discuss, my goal is to always point teenagers back to Jesus. I encourage them to know that life with Jesus works from the inside out. Falling in love with him comes first, and it results in our outward lives being transformed to his image. I share my own struggles, detailing how my relationship with Jesus has not only brought comfort but has increased my faith. As teens navigate difficult cultural issues, I turn their attention to the Gospels, letting Jesus himself inform their worldview. I let them know that if we get the rules right but get Jesus wrong, we get true life wrong. I admit, at times I can come across as a little goofy and over-the-top when I talk about Jesus, but my greatest desire is for teenagers to know Jesus and make him known. In a culture that screams “You do you,” I encourage them to “Do Jesus” instead, following his example of loving others like he loved them.

I have had to learn to be patient with young people through their process of loving Jesus, realizing that it took much too long for Jesus to get my own attention. Just as seeds planted in one season yield fruit in a different one, I have had to be faithful in leading even when the ground looks barren, realizing that God is doing an “inside” job. It is also important for me to cultivate my own relationship with Jesus as I lead others to do the same. As Jesus infiltrates my being, I become winsome and am able to have influence over those under my care. This gift of pointing others toward a growing, thriving, and loving relationship with Jesus is like no other; I am always humbled that God has given me the privilege of shepherding this next generation of Jesus-followers. In so doing, the commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 is realized and disciples are made, bringing glory to God.

Teresa Genoway has been a high school volunteer youth worker for nine years. When not talking about Jesus, she enjoys cooking and gardening and is always happy to share a meal and a bouquet of flowers with her high schoolers! She has been married to Jeff for thirty-three years and is a mother to four grown children.