

## **Building a Strong Youth Ministry**

This is the training outline of a talk by Terran Williams, Dec 2006, as he finished off 10 years of youth ministry involvement. Perhaps some of it will be helpful.

A quick personal reflection: I came from a radically unchurched background and yet was saved, discipled, integrated into community, and initiated into ministry as a teenager through a vibrant youth ministry in CT city. As I reflect here is what I experienced in this youth ministry:

- There were leaders who loved teenagers, and felt called by God to disciple and reach teenagers.
- There were some Christian teenagers who were taking God seriously and were motivated to reach their friends for Christ.
- There were some creative ideas to actually attract teenagers by focusing on common interests like surfing or music or doing crazy stuff.
- There was an exposure to a community of people (my age and older) who lived attractive lives. Doing stuff together, having fun together.
- The Gospel was communicated in very authentic, Holy Spirit-empowered ways.
- They didn't give up even though I didn't respond that quickly.
- I found some buddies to share my faith with once I was saved.
- I had some experiences of the Holy Spirit once I was saved.
- I was invited to a short-term small group where I was discipled in the basics of God's Word, and where we could meet with God together.
- There were some guys that pursued me when I went walkies and stopped coming for a few months. They took my life seriously, and told me that God had plans to use me. They really made me feel like that church was my church, my spiritual home. They let me be the young, wild guy I was - and really accepted me as I was. They really cared about me, I mean really.

*Basically, in youth ministry I have always tried to give other unchurched teenagers the same opportunities I had to find and follow Christ! I have tried to create teams and environments that made it possible for others to experience the same things as me.*

### **1) Have the right one or two point-leaders of the team that lead the youth ministry.**

- At first one person (or sometimes two people) chosen by the elders will lead the youth ministry, but then that person must build a team who leads the youth ministry. They then lead the team that leads the ministry.
- This person must:

- Be in it for the long-haul.
- Train up others for of they were to move on. Success without a successor is no success at all.
- Keep good relationships and communication with elders overseeing them and with the team you lead. Invite elders from time to time to youth stuff. Try meet with the elder who oversees this ministry at least once every few weeks to chat through how you are, and how things are going.
- Be someone who lives and breathes teenagers and youth culture.
- Keep in contact with other vibrant youth ministry leaders for support and ideas.
- Set the riverbanks (strategy and structures) so that the river (passion, relationships, values, life, energy) can flow.
- Keep reminding the leaders 1) what we are trying to do (vision and values) and how we are going to do it (strategy, structure and ventures).

## **2) Build a strong leadership team.**

- Look for those who have passion for God and character, who have a heart for youth, and who are willing to be trained and led so they can serve the youth with all their heart.
- You could make an announcement for potential leaders, or better yet, you could invite specific people to come check out the possibility of helping out.
- Your ability to attract and build the right team is the number one factor for success! Treat this team like gold. Encourage them. Make sure that they too are following on the heels of the elders and the apostolic team. Give them helpful feedback about how to do it better. Ask them for feedback too from time to time.
- As the ministry grows, try assign to the various the youth ministry leaders roles that line up with their particular strengths and passions. But in the earliest stages, everyone must just do whatever it takes, even if they are not gifted for it.
- Have an annual youth leaders camp. Plan the camp with some purposes in mind:
  - The team needs to really enjoy each other. So make time for lots of fun!
  - The team needs to reflect on the past and learn the lessons. So have a time of asking, ‘What lessons have we been learning? What is working? What can we do better?’
  - The team will urgently need some sharpening up in some skills and mindsets in youth ministry. So have some time for training. Perhaps invite someone to come to the camp to give that training for an hour or so.
  - The team needs to be freshly encouraged by God. So make time for worship, and time everyone to wait on God and share prophetic

encouragements for the next year. These must be written down, prayed through, and re-affirmed in the year following.

- The team needs to dream and plan for what's ahead by grappling with the questions: 'What new things that we haven't yet done, can we try?'

### **3) Give lots of thought to good riverbanks of strategy and structure:**

- The river is what we want (ie we want everyone on fire for God, loving one another, loving the Word, reaching the lost, serving in the church, developing their servant-leadership). But we need to have good river-banks to get there!
- Every year 'tweak' the riverbanks so that more river can flow. Never just copy other churches! Every youth ministry leadership team must seek God for themselves around this.
- Don't be too quick to radically change riverbanks. It takes time to develop momentum. And people feel insecure when you too often change the way things are done.
- Here is an example of Friends First youth ministry river banks at the moment (Dec, 2006)
  - Weekly structure:
    - Wednesday morning: The two or so point leaders meet to plan how to lead the team.
    - Thursday night half hour prayer meeting for leadership team (just before corporate prayer).
    - Friday night:
      - Core Groups - 6.30 till 7.45 led by one or two leaders.
      - Frequency - 8-10 pm.
    - Sunday morning: Slipstream (grade 8-11s) during Sunday word, unless we decide to keep them in.
    - Sunday night: teens sit in front left, and have a kind of VIP section afterwards.
  - Annual structure:
    - One or two leadership meetings per month. All leaders get together to eat together, reflect and plan.
    - NCMI-relating Churches 'Camp Revolution' in January.
    - Youth take Sunday night meeting in April / May.
    - Two or three serving / mission opportunities in July school holiday for the youth to choose from.
    - Beginning third term Youth Leaders Camp.
    - Third term radical outreach strategy for four weeks.
    - Early fourth term whole youth ministry camp.
    - End of the fourth term have a special Grade 7 welcome night (to prepare them for Grade 8).
  - Read all you can on youth ministry, and check out [www.youthministry.com](http://www.youthministry.com) but realise that American youth ministry is far more program-based than ours.

#### **4) Create ownership, making the youth feel like this is their thing.**

- Although most of your leaders will be out of school people:
  - Try and find those few teens who are solid for God for at least two years and get them to come to leaders meetings.
  - Remind the older leaders that their goal is not to do everything, but to make space for the teenagers to do as much of everything as possible.
- Create *ownership* by giving away small and then bigger responsibilities.
- Ask teens to bring food, oversee the tucksop, share their testimonies, close in prayer, lead worship, help in décor, join the band etc.
  - Always explain to them 1) what you want them to do and 2) how they can do it. Don't leave them floating. Don't give too-big responsibilities too soon. Don't give spiritual responsibilities like doing the talk, or leading the worship, or leading the prayer time until they have been going solid for God for at least two years.

#### **5) Make plenty of space for the Holy Spirit.**

- Acts 4:31 shows that if you want much power in the youth ministry, there must be much prayer. Get the leaders seeking God on their own and together. Create a culture of prayer. Every meeting, every small group - prayer before, during, after. Make times for the Holy Spirit to touch people in times of worship.

#### **6) Get relational / real.**

- The most important word in youth ministry is 'relationship'. People don't care how much you know till they know how much you care.
- Teens don't want anything fake, or hypocritical. They are drawn to reality.
- Create space for people to connect with each other.
- Do cool youthy ice-breaker type things that facilitate people meeting each other. Don't play games for the sake of filling in space, but as a way of getting teens to laugh with each other, and feel connected.
  - <http://www.ultimatecampresource.com/site/camp-activities/ice-breakers.html>
  - Ask the teenagers what fun stuff to do. They know stuff.
  - Beware of being cheesy. Only play games sometimes.
- Take opportunity for one-on-one time. Grab coffee with them, watch sport with them, take them to the Spur or to movies or whatever.

#### **7) Create an identity.**

- The youth ministry should create an identity. Youth want to belong to a group, to a brand.
  - Let them name it.
  - Identity flows out of vision / values, so try create a vision/values statement. Here is the one we used for several years: *'We're a growing revolution of young friends, having fun and going wild for*

*God, as we become more like Jesus, and reach and serve a world where reality bites. We bite back.'*

- Make sure that the meetings are accessible for everyone, not just some cultural groups.
- At the same time, most teens will not just want to feel part of the youth ministry, but part of the church. We must build them towards the church! Get the teens to be in the band, to be the small group on duty, to do the New Members course etc.

### **8) Create a warm, inclusive friendly culture.**

- Work hard to actually get teenagers making other teenagers feel welcome. Perhaps have a youth welcoming team.
- We once devoted a whole Frequency evening to training the young people to be hospitable.
- A survey of 10000 teenagers who were involved in church revealed that the number one draw card for them was that 'this was a warm bunch of people who accepted me as I am.'

### **9) Push through disappointment again and again.**

- Teens are an erratic bunch really.
- Your group will go in and out of fashion.
- Don't be overexcited by numbers.
- Encourage the team to support each other.
- Build for the long-haul. It's a marathon, not a sprint.
- What good is it if the youth ministry kicks for three years and then collapses? Keep it kicking for thirty!

## **Some Thoughts on different structures / strategies**

### **Thoughts on regular leadership meetings.**

- The point leader(s) must plan these meetings beforehand.
- Most importantly, they must be wonderful times with God and each other. Of course, some work and planning and discussing must be done, but mostly there should be a real sense of energy and life. Eat together in these times. Worship and pray together too. Encourage and prophesy over each other. Sometimes get an elder to come and encourage you for twenty minutes before you get down to work.
- Always agree on the next leadership meeting time and place.
- Some things that need to be done in these times include: 1) Planning the next month or two ahead. 2) Discussing pastoral challenges and how to deal with it (this will include getting elders involved when you feel you are out of your depth).

### **Thoughts on weekly big groups.**

- There are three goals to keep in mind for these big group times:

- Goal 1: Make sure people are getting to know each other.
- Goal 2: Help people grow spiritually and be amped about seeing each other again on Sunday.
- Goal 3: Make sure that new people feel welcome and want to come again.
- Most times you can try achieve all three goals. But some evenings need to be planned that focus on just one of the three. So it sometimes works to have a three-week cycle:
  - A radical fun and relationship-building night.
  - A radical spiritual night.
  - A radical outreach night.
- Remember that fun and laughter rules! It is a sin to bore people with the Gospel. They need to feel the joy and life that mark the life of Jesus.
- Choose a time in the week that is best for most. Friday night may not be best. What about Sunday afternoon? Or Saturday night?
- Use multimedia:
  - Don't just talk. Use video-clips. Powerpoint pictures. Object lessons. Music.
- Think of the atmosphere:
  - Dim lights. Candles. A chilled party vibe.
  - Buy Foosball ASAP. Pool Table.
  - Music. Have someone overseeing music. Find out what they dig and play that. Christian music only.
    - Go buy CDs with youth.
  - Food.
- Remember to use tighter spaces. There should not be much open space. The reason is simple: squash creates buzz.

### **Thoughts on weekly small group (which we call Core Groups)**

- Be clear on the goals of small groups:
  - To build real friendships.
  - To help everyone grow spiritually during the week.
  - To experience and listen to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God together.
  - To invite and include new people.
  - To serve the youth ministry and church as a team from time to time.
- In small groups leaders can really focus on discipling and shepherding everyone. So if a kid stops coming, it is up to this person to pursue them.
- Keep the Bible central. Small group models the personal devotional life.
- Keep lots of space for discussion time.
  - 20% of leaders talking, 80% everyone else talking.
  - Keep inviting questions: what do you guys need from this group?
- Eat together. Have fun together.
- Check in regularly. You could ask a question like, 'Describe your week as a flower, a wave, a rugby game - how was it?' or (once the group feels safe) 'What has God been saying to you this week?'

- Encourage them to share from their Quiet Times.
- Remember that with boys that they generally bond through doing something physical together like skating or kicking around a ball or playful wrestling. So, sweat together before you cry together. Generally with girls you can get deep right away. Girls usually bond through talking.
- Creating little groups of people digging into God together makes for strong friendships and belonging and discipleship. Make sure the small group leaders really get involved in the lives of the youth. Meet outside of meetings. Small groups should meet in a comfortable, safe place. Get in homes as often as possible. Youth bond when they see each other's rooms. Rooms are sacred space. From time to time go out to places together for movies or milkshakes etc.

#### **Thoughts on Sunday meetings.**

- Keep punting it in every meeting.
- Create a youth space in the meeting.
- Get the teenagers to contribute (eg worship band, prayer)
- Annually get youth to host a meeting.
- Remind the youth leadership team that they are 'on-duty' on Sundays too. Look out for and include new teens, and go and chat to teens.
- Speak to the eldership team and give them ideas for including the young people more in the Sundays. Ask them to make specific mention of the teenagers too in the illustrations they use in their talks too, for example.

#### **Thoughts on camps.**

- The right time in the year. First or third term are best - no exams. Book now for next year! Don't compete with big school camps. Keep the talks and workshops relevant. Have lots of chill out time. Have big fun active games. Experiment with girls only and guys only weekends away. Make sure that the teens feedback what God did / said in the Sunday meetings following.

#### **Thoughts on creating special ministry opportunities.**

- Eg Agulhus ministry trip, Apostolic trips, Holiday Clubs for kids.
- Do both open invitations, as well as special invitations.
- Make sure the teens feedback testimonies in the Sunday meetings following.

#### **Suggested Action:**

- Chat through this document with God. Ask him to highlight the God-thoughts that apply to your ministry right now.
- Chat through this little document with an elder and ask for feedback on what does and does not apply to you.
- Chat through this with the rest of the youth leaders and ask what can we apply to our own context? (PS: adopt ideas from no-one, but adapt ideas from anyone).