

From fire-fighting to
continuous growth:
Lessons from 20 successful
church-based youth ministries

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My three jobs

- As the CEO of a business
- As a professor at Alliance Bible Seminary. Program director of the Diploma in Pastoral Ministry (Youth). All students are currently youth pastors at different churches.
- As a "volunteer youth pastor" at my church

Outline

- Challenges: "The fires we are all fighting"
- Solution: "Back to the three Basic Principles"
- Application: "Making it work in North America"

Challenges

- Issues facing the youth
- Issues facing the youth ministry (of a local church)
- Issues facing the youth pastor

Issues facing the youth

- The environment: family, school and study, relationship, career, money
- Their values: individualistic, liberal, materialistic, secular
- Issues facing "Yan": a real life example

Issues facing the youth ministry (of a local church)

- Low or uneven attendance: competition for their time
- Youth found programs unattractive
- Massive dropout at senior high school and at college level
- Lack of youth commitment to the faith and to the church
- Lack of lay leaders and helpers

Issues facing the youth pastor

- Personal frustration and strong sense of failure
- "Main church" appears to be critical and unsympathetic
- "I am not the right person for this job" "I do not have the skill, style, experience for this"
- "I am different, you do not understand" mindset:
"What works for you cannot possibly work for me"
"My situation is much tougher" "I have a family!"
"This is US, American kids are different!"

"The local church is the hope of the world, and its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders." ~ Bill Hybels

"Youth ministry is the future of the church, and it is all about the mindset of the pastor." ~ My core belief

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WK Church: the beginning

- The new pastor wandering in the school
- The 70 kids at his home
- The 7,000 congregation

In depth study of Asian youth ministries

- Study 300-400 youth ministries of local churches
- Mainly Hong Kong but also China and Malaysia
- In depth interviews with leaders

Heavy investment in youth ministries

- Doubling the number of youth services in the last five years. 60% of local churches now have youth services.
- Most local church have youth band and youth basketball or soccer team.
- 30-40% of pastoral vacancies are for youth pastors and program workers

Unsatisfactory results

- Highly unstable, potential wipeout: 30-40%
- Stagnant/Dropout at college: 40-50%
- Growing, facing bottleneck: 20%
- Continuous growth in numbers and spiritual maturity: 3-5%

15-20 successful youth ministries

- Consistent numerical growth for more than a decade: many growing from 10-20 teenagers to 300-500 teenagers (a couple grow to thousands) on a relatively stable adult congregation (ie., growth not driven by growing number of families in the church)
- More than half of senior high school and college kids in these churches are spiritually committed no matter how you track (daily devotion, prayer, bible reading, offering/donation, commitment to church ministry)
- Many youth take up substantial pastoral responsibilities as lay leaders. Many more enter seminaries for full time ministry

15-20 successful youth ministries

- So, what is the difference?
- Surprisingly, NOT in the level or quality of their programs and activities
- Only a few have great activities and programs in the first few years. Most of them have very minimal programs. Even today, as a group, their programming and activities are only average.
- In particular, contrary to the other 95% youth ministries, there are almost no formal basketball or soccer team or similar regular sports activities (although there are plenty of informal fun events).
- The other surprise is that these youth pastors are also NOT particularly well trained in youth counseling (another widely popular training for youth and other pastors)

The real difference: the three basic principles

- High touch pastoring: one phone call per week plus face-to-face mentoring (outside normal church sessions)
- Mass evangelism: bring at least twenty new teenagers into the church each year, no matter what it takes
- Discipleship the old fashioned way: mutual accountability, in depth life sharing, and rigorous life mentoring

High-touch pastoring

- The reluctant youth pastor....the "eight year old" boy who never grows old
- My visit to the WK Church: one phone call per week
- The two crisis of the first AA youth group: 13 years old and 17 years old

The Fanling Pastor Cheng

- Start from ground zero ten years ago, five hundred youth now
- 32 one-on-one sessions, non stop per week for ten years
- Target: newcomers, group leaders, and regular members

"My regular week"

- A chart on how I spent a week at work, at the seminary, and at church

Mass evangelism

- Why you need at least 20-30 newcomers each year
- Clustering
- Friends of church kids vs. direct evangelism

Two direct approaches

- The Fanling pastor: standing fifty yards from school entrance
- Direct promotion of "integrated" programs (youth fellowship and other youth program bundled)

Discipleship the old-fashion way

- Separate program on top of normal youth programs
- Led directly by youth pastor
- All group members will help in youth ministry. Everyone must serve as group leaders and learn to care for others in a frontline role
- NOT a short program, BUT ongoing program for 5-10 years
- My church has twenty groups with 140 members. I directly lead six groups with a total of 50 members. The first group is now in its twelfth year (mostly married with kids, three deacons)

Discipleship is role modeling

- Monkey see monkey do

True discipleship

- Mutual accountability to build spiritual discipline
- In depth life sharing for strong team dynamics and motivation
- Rigorous life and ministry mentoring

Regular mentoring

- 30-60 minutes per session
- One session every two to three months
- Three part conversation: (a) personal life: school, family, job, personal finance, relationship, time management; (b) spiritual life: daily devotion, church attendance, money offering; (c) his/her ministry and service (e.g., how much time he spends with his teens)

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Cultural difference?

- Yes and no
- Open minded and adaptive in activities
- Clear and conservative expectations in discipleship

Discipleship as Christian counter culture

- Popular culture: individualistic, materialistic, liberal
- Discipleship: covenant, mutual accountable, life sharing, clear spiritual and life values and ongoing mentoring

Critical to reach out to the unchurched youth in North America

- Why not just Christian families?

Critical to think through youth mobility

- Teenagers in your neighborhood mostly stay in town for college? Come back and work in home town after college?
- College students mostly stay behind to work?

Three strategic targets

- Junior high school. My preferred target: easier to get a large initial group; a chance to shape their values during the critical formative years (14-18 years old). But this only works if they will stay in church beyond school years
- College kids. More accessible environment for evangelism. Only work if they mostly stay behind to work.
- Young graduates (22-26 years old). Could be very high growth (searching for friendship at this stage of life)