

A Sharpened Focus for Junior High Ministry

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Each youth ministry is unique. Whether you serve in Canada, the USA, Mexico, Africa or in another ministry context abroad, we share many similarities while celebrating uniqueness. One thing we have in common is the desire for growth in our ministries and health in our students.

We know that junior high ministry is unique, that it reaches students at a critical time in their faith development. Parents leave their kids with us, hoping that when they pick them up, they'll be less monster-like, more firmly rooted in their faith and more passionately in love with God.

From my perspective, junior high ministry faces some of the same difficult issues that all other areas of student ministry face. Here are a few struggles I've faced along the way as I've worked with junior high students.

Programmed Results versus Deep Change

Our world focuses on the product. It looks to the results of the *program*. It uses words like "success" to measure whether a ministry program is valuable. It's easy to begin pursuing a distorted approach to youth ministry. The things we measure to define success (baptisms and conversions) are the fruits we incorrectly identify solely with proclamation of the gospel. We forget that in the life of Jesus, there was equal opportunity for new life, found within his desire to proclaim but also to *demonstrate* the gospel to others. Junior high students are stuck in this dichotomy too.

Rooted in a desire to keep students safe and coddle them in their faith development, we often over-program their faith for them. We plan their activities, monitor them closely—creating a fishbowl faith. But students are simply not content with sitting in a church, a home or some other location and talking about life in Christ. They crave opportunities to live this life together in community with each other and with a group of leaders who desperately desire to be present in their lives. They want to live these beliefs out in the world. They want to test their beliefs, and they want to show others the strength of their faith.

Effective junior high ministry must recognize the needs of youth and allow these needs to inform and shape our programs. If we are to remain relevant and earn the right to be heard in this emerging generation, we must be willing to be present through a tangible demonstration of what it means to love God and love others in the lives of youth. Our ministry philosophy becomes something that must be more relationally driven than program oriented.

Me-Centered Belief versus Correct Biblical Theology

The emotional and biological changes happening inside the bodies of our students lead them to process much of their belief through a matrix of

how they *feel*. We as youth workers have become so adept at asking, *How does this passage apply to your life?* so that now, students tend to consider the *application* of Scripture long before they've considered the actual *meaning* of the passage.

Junior high is the perfect place to help students begin to understand the meaning within each biblical passage. Through the exploration of basic biblical hermeneutics, we can guide junior high youth into the world of self-discovery of Scripture and help them to answer questions like, *How do I fit in with the stories of the Bible?* and *Is the Bible relevant for life in our world today?*

Once we've challenged junior high students to discover the meaning of a passage, we can easily return them to the *How does this work in my life?* question. This is not a step toward me-centered belief; instead, it accomplishes two important tasks. First, it keeps students engaged in the process of biblical study. Second, it effectively meets students in their developmental need while honoring the correct biblical hermeneutic.

Junior high students desire to be people of significance, and the way we lead them into Scripture creates the environment for them to be learning what that means.

Crisis Response versus Family Wholeness

There is no denying the fact that each generation of junior high youth in our society is experiencing an identity crisis at an increasingly rapid pace. The percentage of youth growing up in broken homes is rising. Our cultural values are reinforcing our pursuits while circumventing the primary ministry institution we call the family. We are more materialistic. We live in an ethical gray area. We struggle over community sin.

Junior high ministry must be about the restoration of the broken. As youth workers, each of us has the responsibility to represent Christ to youth in the presence of their families. We must challenge families to walk with us, and we must be willing to walk alongside them, offering the body of Christ to them for those moments of crisis and change. Junior high ministry is in that unique place, serving as a parents' introduction to what student ministry is all about. It's in these initial relationships where we junior high youth workers can say to the parents, "We are here for you. Let's work together in the process of spiritual formation for your family."

We need to help bridge the gap between parent and child. Our focus should be on building the family, to restore what has been lost and to celebrate what is being found.

Does a lot of this apply to other ministries? Certainly! Senior high youth workers, college pastors, leaders of senior saints ministries... We all share the same burden, hoping to walk alongside those who invite us into their faith development—but with one major difference. Junior high workers

must learn to begin to measure different intangibles in the quest to define growth.

As we move forward in the process of challenging junior high students, let's remember that it's not about the numbers, the goofy games or the number of volunteers we're taking on the next leader retreat. The focus is the changed lives of the students. And when you think about it, that's the *only* thing we should focus on.