



Every Church Can Build a Sustainable Youth Ministry

Mark DeVries

Each year our Youth Ministry Architects team is privileged to work intimately with dozens of churches, partnering with them in building sustaining youth ministries. The more churches we have worked with, the more we have discovered patterns. By far the most startling is this: *Most American churches have, often without recognizing it, embraced a clear model for youth ministry, a model more popular than purpose-driven, family-based, or contemplative. Most churches have chosen to do youth ministry with a model best described as gambling.*

It usually looks like this: The leaders of the church cross their fingers and believe, with all their hearts, that *this time* the cards will fall in their favor. This time, they'll find the superstar youth director who will change everything. . . fast. This time, they'll find just the right curriculum, just the right convention that will, finally, make youth ministry *work* as it has never really worked before, at least not in a sustainable way. This time when they role the dice, if they wish hard enough, a thriving youth ministry will turn up.

But few people get rich gambling. For every one that does, there are thousands mired in chronic poverty. But wealth—and sustainable youth ministry—come not from gambling but predictably from a strategic, sacrificial, and annoyingly inconvenient investment of time and resources.

But there is good news: building a sustainable, thriving youth ministry is not only possible, it's actually predictable. Sadly, most churches don't have the patience to wait to build a sustainable youth ministry, so they opt for the roll of the dice. There is a better way.

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A Systems Approach

Leaders are responsible for both the big structures that serve as cornerstones of confidence, and for the human touches that shape a positive emotional climate to inspire and motivate people.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Sustainable youth ministries are led by systems leaders. The day of the camp counselor youth minister who focuses only on students is over. Sustainable youth ministries make the leap from a short-term, patchwork ministry to one's based on established systems that last long after the current leadership team has moved on.

Every church can build a sustainable youth ministry by attending first to the two key foundational systems for youth ministry:

- 1) **Architecture:** the structures of sustainability, and
- 2) **Atmosphere:** the culture, climate and ethos that sustain the health of an organization

Content Thinking Versus Systems Thinking

As I have tried to get my head around the power of a systems approach to initiating strategic change, family systems theory has been immensely helpful, particularly in its distinction between “content issues” and “system issues.”

A content issue involves a specific topic, usually a topic of conflict. In youth ministry, typical content issues can be anything from a problem with cliques to a problem with the seventh-grade curriculum.

System issues, on the other hand, are those processes that take place beneath, around, and within the particular topics of concern, things like *trust* among the leadership, *clarity of expectations* for staff and volunteers, or *ownership* of the ministry beyond the staff.

Trying to initiate change while staying solely focused on content issues is like sprinting up and own the aisle of a speeding jet, believing that the sheer force of effort will speed up the plane. Too many youth workers are wearing themselves out, completely unaware of the fact that they are a part of a system that is carrying them (and their ministries)

in a direction that may be completely independent of their exhausting labor.

Sadly, the hired youth staff person often becomes the content issue of choice when its time for launching criticism at a youth ministry. “Simple” solutions to a youth ministry’s problems almost always start with a focus on the youth director: he needs to get more organized; she just needs to get out of the office and spend more time with kids; he just needs a little more training; or (the more permanent solution) she just needs to *go*.

But dramatic, sustainable change happens in youth ministries only when we take our focus off the “presenting issues”—the obvious concerns that seem to be creating so much anxiousness—and put our focus on the system patterns that keep us locked into unproductive ways of doing things.

The Proverbs 14:4 Challenge

As we embark on making the shift to a systems way of doing youth ministry. I invite you to take *The Proverbs 14:4 Challenge*. This obscure proverb has the power to reframe our understanding of the kind of hassle involved in building a sustainable ministry:

Where no oxen are, the manger is clean.

But much revenue comes by the strength of the ox. (Proverbs 14:4, NASB)

I know—it’s not exactly a passage that will start a revival. But these words offer a clear challenge to any church still looking for the “Easy Button.” Let me put it in other words:

If you want a manger free of ox poop, don't buy an ox.

But if you want to multiply your harvest, an ox sure will come in handy.

The challenge of sustainable youth ministry is as straightforward as the proverb: Want to build a ministry that lasts, a ministry that deeply impacts young people, families, and the wider world? Then be prepared for the mess.

Stage 1. Building Right: The Structures of Sustainability

How do we move our youth ministries from where they are to where we want them to be? It all starts with the single word *structure*. Any land animal more than six inches long needs a structure, a skeleton, to survive. And any youth ministry with more than a handful of youth will need one as well. Unfortunately, most youth ministries (and youth ministers) are woefully short on structure.

Most churches frantically try to make it to the next level without building first-level structures. As a result, most churches build house-of-cards youth ministries, programs that expand willy-nilly to the point of implosion.

But sustainable youth ministries do it differently.

Squaring the Corners: Developing Control Documents

All four walls were up. Our one-room building in the slums of Tijuana was taking shape. Our work had progressed more rapidly than expected. Spirits were high—until our work came to a screeching halt.

Our construction guide asked for a few volunteers to “square the building.” As our more agile workers positioned themselves on top of the corners, the rest of us waited for what felt like a very long time.

The grumbling of annoyed youth and leaders (“What’s taking so long?” “Come on!”) couldn’t hurry our site supervisor. He knew what most of the rest of us didn’t: taking time to square the house would save exponential amounts of time later.

Very few churches take the time to “square” their youth ministries. As a result, these ministries waste countless hours reinventing the wheel each year, compensating for the results of foundational corners that never got squared. In our work with churches, we look for five key documents to confirm that a youth ministry has been “squared.”

1. Directories

Most churches have lists of their youth, volunteers, and visitors, but those listed are usually stored in a variety of arcane computer systems. A sustainable youth ministry has three standard starts directories:

1. Youth Directory: including name, school, grade, parents’ names, phone number, and any other information that seems appropriate
2. Volunteers and Staff Directory: including each person’s contact information and role in the ministry
3. Visitors Directory: including the names and contact information for all visitors to youth ministry in the previous two to three years.

There’s no hard-and-fast rule for deciding which young people belong in the youth directory and which belong in the visitors directory. What’s absolutely crucial, though, is that these directories be updated at least annually, using a consistent standard for who does and does not qualify as “ours.” As a way of maximizing the accuracy of the directories, we recommend *printing* them annually and distributing them at least to the members of the youth leadership team.

2. An Annual Events Calendar

There’s no reason for a youth ministry not to have its major-events calendar mapped out at least a year in advance, except laziness. Every September, parents should be able to plan around events, including trips, for the upcoming summer (nine months away). Too many youth ministers complain about the lack of committed volunteers and youth who don’t sign up for programs, when those programs are announced less than six weeks before they happen. It’s almost impossible to recruit volunteers to take load-bearing responsibility for programs less than six weeks away.

3. Job Descriptions

When I ask the youth ministers we coach for a copy of their job description, the typical answers are variations on these: “I know I’ve got one, but. . . [nervous laughter].” “I haven’t looked at it in years.”

Everyone from the lead youth staff to the van drivers have a better chance of playing their positions well if we can at least give them, in writing, a document that outlines the scope of their responsibilities. We like to help churches create results-oriented job descriptions, rather than responsibility-oriented ones, an approach that gives latitude to each worker to determine the “how” behind the desired results. (A few sample job descriptions can be found at www.ymarchitects.com.) Note, however, that a job description only gets used

to the extent that it is part of a larger process that includes an annual review and revision of it.

4. The Master Recruiting List

Most youth ministers struggle to find volunteers. But very few have a clear process for recruiting the volunteers they need, beyond blanket appeals to the overworked church members. A master recruiting list begins the process by first determining exactly how many volunteer leaders are needed for the coming year. We recommend creating this list in February (when recruiting season opens) and spending a few hours every week calling the most likely prospects, expecting a “no” from two-thirds of them.

Start thinking like a coach. No football coach would ever think of stepping onto the field with only five players. A youth director who runs ahead to start building programs before he or she has a team to run those programs will be perpetually mired in sputtering initiatives that never quite get off the ground. (A sample master recruiting template can be found at www.ymarchitects.com.)

5. The Curriculum Template

We call the final control document a curriculum template, a six- or seven-year game plan of how the teachings of youth ministry will be structured. There’s an almost infinite variety of approaches to developing a curriculum template.

Most youth ministries have a reactive curriculum “plan,” driven primarily by the availability (and marketing) of specific curriculum resources. A curriculum template, on the other hand, provides the framework for a wide variety of resources that might be used. Here are a few examples:

- One church might choose a curriculum template based on the Common Lectionary and match the teachings in the youth ministry to this three-year, crossdenominational plan that ensures exposure to the entire scope of the Bible in three years.
- Another church might buy into the scope and sequence of a denominational curriculum or an independently published resource.
- Another church might have an annual rotation, ensuring that each year, the youth of the church are exposed to core topics, like Jesus, Old Testament, New Testament,

relationships, missions and service, soul-tending, decision-making, and apologetics.

- And still another church might choose to let the flow of the Bible provide the template, beginning each year with Genesis and ending each year in Revelation.

Only after the template is determined should specific curriculum resources be chosen or developed. This approach allows for the certain reality that some curriculum resources won’t work and will need to be replaced, *without* having to change the template or the overall plan.

Unlike the other control documents (which are straightforward assignments), the development of a clear curriculum template is a complex process that will likely require a much broader buy-in from stakeholders in the youth ministry.

Sample Curriculum Templates

Model #1. Bible-Centered Template

(Two 3-year rotations: grades 7-9 and 10-12)

- Year 1—Old Testament
- Year 2—New Testament (Non-Gospels)
- Year 3—Jesus (Gospels)

Model #2. The Buckets Template

(Broad topics repeated every year; 6-year rotation)

- The Buckets: Relationships, Old Testament, New Testament, Jesus, Missions/Service, Soul Tending, Decision Making/Life Skills
- Year One Example for grades 7– 12:
 - 1) Parents (relationships), 2) Prophets (Old Testament), 3) Romans (New Testament), 4) Parables (Jesus), 5) Justice (Missions/Service); 6) Prayer (Soul Tending); 7) Dating (Decision Making/Life Skills)
- Year Two Example: Same categories with different topics.

Model #3. Lectionary Template

(Based on the Common Lectionary, formatted in two, 3-year rotations)

Model #4. Broad Categories Template

(One 2-year rotation for grades 7-8, and one 4-year rotation for grades 9-12.)

- Grades 7– 8: The Bible-Centered Template (see Model #1)
- Grades 9– 12: The Buckets Template (see Model #2)

Model #5. Seasonal Template

(One 2-year rotation for grades 7-8, and one 4-year rotation for grades 9-12.)

- Grades 7- 8: Buckets topics interrupted by Bible-centered topics: 1) Advent—Old Testament, 2) Relationships, 3) Lent—Bible/Jesus, 4) Missions/Service, 5) Soul Tending, 6) Summer—New Testament
- Grades 9-12: 1) Advent—Relationships, 2) Old Testament, 3) Lent—Missions/Service, 4) Jesus, 5) Summer—Soul Tending, 6) New Testament

Model #6. Theological Themes

(One 6-year rotation)

- Year 1: Who is God?
- Year 2: Who is Jesus?
- Year 3: Who is the Holy Spirit?
- Year 4: What is Salvation?
- Year 5: What is the Church?
- Year 6: What is our Mission?

The corners are, of course, not the foundation. We build on the foundation of Christ, but before we start building, we've got to make sure we have squared our corners.

Purposeful Structure: Developing Visioning Documents

Once the control documents are in place, it's time to develop documents that can clarify and provide the roadmap for the future of youth ministry. If a visioning process is to set the course for a youth ministry's future, it will involve a broad range of stakeholders in the ministry, including teachers, youth leaders, elders, youth, and parents. But the process of drafting the four vision documents in a way that propels a ministry forward is no small feat.

By allowing multiple groups to work on drafting and revising the same documents, we avoid the trap of premature closure, the temptation to accept the first "good enough" idea that the most vocal group member proposes. Without an intentionally crafted process, the development of the visioning documents easily settles into what Patrick Lencioni calls, "an atmosphere of self-victimizing groupthink."

We use a sometimes tedious and time-consuming process that engages ten to twenty stakeholders (staff, parents, volunteers, and sometimes youth) over a period of twelve to fifteen hours to craft these four

key vision documents: 1) a mission statement, 2) measurable three-year goals, 3) a statement of values, and 4) an organizational chart.

1. The Youth Ministry Mission Statement

Driven by the urgent demands of simply keep a youth ministry afloat, most youth workers define long-range planning as "getting this month's calendar done just in time for the newsletter to go out."

But without a clearly articulated, compelling vision of what their church would like for its youth ministry to accomplish, these ministries meander with no higher purpose than simply "having a youth ministry" or "having a youth ministry better than most other churches in town." But this is not a vision; it is a fearful reaction to the risk of extinction.

A clearly articulated vision protects churches from becoming, in the words of Robert Lewis, "a sort of Christian 'club' that [exhausts] itself trying to keep its members happy." A compelling vision protects youth ministries from competing agendas and paralyzing practices. And a well-crafted mission statement can become the filter through which leaders of a ministry determine which of the hundreds of ideas before them they will actually implement. (For a sample mission statement go to: www.ymarchitects.com.)

2. Measurable Three-Year Goals

Most youth ministers I know are happy not to measure anything. Many bristle at the thought of tracking attendance patterns or setting measurable goals. But without agreed upon, measurable goals, a youth ministry will suffer from terminal vagueness. A numbers-free youth ministry simple doesn't work for the long haul.

Youth workers can be victims of numbers or authors of them. What would happen, I wonder, if youth workers stopped fighting *against* numbers and started taking responsibility for determining what measurements will best help them track the results they want to achieve?

Without clear and measurable goals, the youth ministry is evaluated by as many standards as there are complainers. Without clear and measurable goals, the only marching order for a youth director is "try to keep as many people happy as possible." Clear, measurable targets can protect youth workers from the pressure to say yes to every new idea that bubbles up from important people in the church.

As important as the first visioning process is, it's equally important for the youth ministry to have processes in place for evaluating and re-visioning its goals *each and every year*. The youth ministries we work with establish three-year goals, each accompanied by a one-year benchmark. The three-year goals tend to be "stretch goals," often set as high as the ministry hopes to reach, knowing that normal organizations tend to hit 50 percent of their goals. The one-year benchmarks are more attainable, since these are standards against which the effectiveness of the ministry will be measured annually.

Goals do not necessarily mean that bigger is better. They affirm that *clearer is better*. Goals help define what a particular ministry will look like as it moves toward increasing health. If we want our youth ministries to be evaluated by something *other* than numbers and programs, we must take responsibility to define our targets clearly.

3. A Statement of Values

Values stand guard over the climate of a youth ministry. The climate or culture of a ministry must never be sacrificed on the altar of achieving measurable goals. Values protect a youth ministry from becoming so goal-oriented that it sacrifices the things that matter most.

Values define the spirit with which we will go about accomplishing our goals. For instance, love, kindness, and respect are values.

One church, which had run offer four youth ministers in as many years, named one of their values as "excellence." As we processed together how this value, if left unchecked, could result in a destructive, overactive-white-blood-cell pattern, they chose to add the value of *grace*. Without being intentional about its values, a youth ministry has little power to cultivate a climate of transformation. (For samples of value statements go to: www.ymarchitects.com.)

4. A Structure

Ambitious churches often design grand schemes for success that simply outrun their available resources. I've spoken with more than a few senior pastors who express hope for a youth ministry that will engage four hundred to five hundred youth a week. But few seem to have any idea of how many resources it will take to sustain such a ministry. And so the church hires a youth staff woefully inadequate for

accomplishing the church's ambitious vision—a recipe for nonsustainability.

Getting a handle on the resources a strategic plan will require demands a clear definition of the organization's structure. Michael Gerber notes,

Without an Organization Chart, everything hinges on luck and good feelings, on the personalities of the people and the goodwill they share. Unfortunately, personalities, good feelings, goodwill, and luck aren't the only ingredients of a successful organization; alone, they are the recipe for chaos and disaster.

In almost every vision retreat I've done, someone resists the idea of a traditional organization chart, and recommends instead something more organic, maybe a three-dimensional matrix chart or one with less layers, more like a series of concentric circles than a hierarchy. My experience has been that, though I appreciate the creativity and out-of-the-box thinking that these folks bring to the table, attempts at creativity with an organizational chart typically result in fuzzy definitions of who is responsible for what, the very opposite of the purpose of such a chart. (For samples of youth ministry organizational charts go to www.ymarchitects.com.)

Building Right – Reflection Questions

1. Which of the control documents does your ministry have in place?
2. Which of the vision documents does your ministry have in place?
3. What prevents your ministry from "squaring the corners" and getting the key structures outlined in this section in place?
4. If you had to guess, what is the target number of youth the leaders of your church would like to see involved on an average week?

Stage 2. Changing Culture: The Work of the Environmental Architect

Nothing good happens by accident.
Peter Drucker

Almost every longing related to youth ministry is connected to a single desire: We want to *change something*.

Sometimes that desire is simple and straightforward: “I want to get my youth committee out from under the children’s committee on the organizational chart.” Others are more far-reaching and global: “I want to move my youth from apathy toward becoming more fully devoted followers of Christ.” And still others are plainly pragmatic: “How can we get more kids involved?” or “How can I recruit more leaders?”

But beneath them all is the same fundamental passion: the drive to create change.

Those who learn to be change agents impact almost everything they touch. And those who never learn this skill stay trapped on a treadmill nowhere.

Youth ministry *does*, in fact, “work,” and it does so with almost predictable regularity. In a wide variety of contexts, across a wide variety of denominations, there *are* youth ministries that have learned to catalyze change, not only in young people’s lives, but in their churches as well. More often than not, when we find those youth ministries, we also discover that a particular kind of culture has been established, a culture in which leaders don’t simply *push* for change, they *cultivate* it.

In the first part of this article we looked at the *core* structures that initiate and sustain strategic change—the *architecture* of transformation. But beyond and beneath the work of the architect (with the blueprints, the steps, the strategies and structures), there are deeper, more fundamental process that impact change. Though sociologists refer to this social atmosphere at the ethos or culture of a group, I use the term *climate*, because terms like “ice cold” or “warmed up” or “stormy” give us not just the meaning of the terms but their *feel* as well.

Climate Control

Most new youth workers step into their roles with the luxury of inexperience, armed with little more than raw enthusiasm to love kids and lead them to Jesus. Certainly not a bad start. They may know how to find activities and programs and curriculums and websites; they might even know how to do contact work and network with other youth workers. But they all must, if that are to navigate the turbulent waters of ministry, do something much more foundational.

I like to call it ***environmental architecture*** (a term borrowed from Erwin McManus). An environmental architect begins with the confession that we have no power to *make* young people grow. We cannot make our churches or youth ministries or senior pastors into what we want them to be. We cannot make parents, volunteers, and youth do what we want them to do. What we can do is create an environment in which this kind of growth and change is not only possible, but probable.

Think greenhouse. A greenhouse is a place where living things grow well, a place protected from the unpredictability of the elements, where fragile plants are able to grow strong regardless of the conditions outside. Fragile plants thrive when the climate is controlled.

In the same way, the environmental architect focuses on creating climate in his or her youth ministry, spending very little time worrying about the climate outside, those things that can’t be controlled, like busy kids, complaining parents, demanding senior pastors.

Periodically I get calls from people who ask if they can come to observe our youth ministry. I warn them to prepare to be underwhelmed. By the time they leave, I can see it on their faces. They don’t say it, but I know what they’re thinking: “We could do *that!* Why is it working here but not for us back home, when our programs are actually *better* than these.

As much as I might hate to admit it, they’re usually right. It’s not that we try to have mediocre programs; it’s just that they seem to happen with disappointing regularity. Yet the ministry continues to thrive. We continue to see surprising transformation in young people’s lives. After two decades of doing ministry in the same setting, I’ve begun to discover why.

Transformation doesn't happen primarily because specific tasks get accomplished or because of the consistently excellent programs. ***Transformation becomes habitual for a youth ministry when a unique climate of transformation is established.*** I'm afraid I had to learn that lesson the hard way.

Climate, Vision, Tasks

Ask any youth director what his or her job is and chances are you'll hear a list of tasks: "I hang out with kids," "I teach the Bible," "I go to meetings." Sadly, most youth workers are almost obsessively focused on tasks. They react to the demands placed before them, daily racing against the clock to try to get more done in less time, to get all the phone calls and emails answered, all the lessons written, the programs prepared. But eventually, almost every youth worker, no matter how organized, realizes that there is simply not enough time to get all the tasks completed.

The completion of a fragmented set of tasks, as much diligence as that process might require, can be the very thing that prevents youth workers from building momentum for their ministries. When this realization comes, it's not unusual for a youth worker (or a church) to send out the call for a "vision."

And the scurry of meetings begins. We've seen churches spend hundreds of volunteer and staff hours to hammer out a vision for the youth ministry, write mission statements and value statements, and prepare measurable goals. The best of these create structures that keep the visioning documents consistently before those responsible for building the ministry. But sadly, vision, in itself, is not enough.

Too often, even the most compelling vision is thwarted because, in spite of all the right structures being in place, little to no attention has been given to the climate. Like working in a building that's structurally sound but filled with noxious gases, these youth ministries may have a fine, well-structured vision. But the climate is toxic, preventing sustainable change from every taking hold.

A Primer on Environmental Architecture

If we are to be environmental architects who work to create the right climate for our youth ministries, where do we begin? We've discovered the five decisions that most profoundly affect the building of a healthy climate: 1) delivering results, 2) trusting the

process, 3) importing joy into the chaos, 4) embracing stories and metaphors, and 5) instilling rituals and traditions.

1. We Deliver Results.

By far the most dramatic way to change the climate of a youth ministry is to provide its stakeholders with the visible evidence that something good actually is happening. Nothing accelerates climate change quite like speeding up results.

To illustrate, I don't have to look any farther than across town at the University of Vanderbilt Commodore football program. A few years ago, the team was in the middle of its predictable losing season. No one expected much more than one or two games where Vandy would spoil the hopes of some SEC football powerhouse. Few even held out hope for a winning season. But all that changed the day after a visit to Neyland Stadium in Knoxville, a game in which the Commodores broke their twenty-plus-year losing streak to the University of Tennessee. If you happened to be in Nashville the week after that game, you would have thought our 'Dores had just won the Super Bowl. One key win *dramatically* shifted the climate.

To begin tilting the climate of a youth ministry in a positive direction, its leaders need to identify a small victory, a single visible result, and go after it. The climate of a youth ministry can change with something as simple as recruiting a new team of volunteers (and commissioning them in front of the church). Another church tipped its youth ministry toward a healthy climate with a single mission trip that attracted just a handful more students than the year before.

2. We Trust the Process.

Moving from where we are to where we want to be takes time—so much time, in fact, that many youth directors short-circuit the process. If we're going to engineer a climate of transformation for our youth ministries, we will not do it by stepping in with guns blazing.

Sustainable change happens when leaders recognize the power of incremental revolution, the power of one small change after another, until the incremental changes result in exponential change. Too many churches and youth ministers distrust the process and find themselves changing focus every few years, gambling their hopes on the next superstar on

the court. As a result, they never experience the profound momentum that builds when a team moves together in the same direction for years.

3. We Import Joy in the Chaos.

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman tells of a study that revealed the power of a joyful climate in maximizing people's ability to solve problems. In this study, two groups were given the very same problem and asked to solve it. The only difference between the groups was that the first watched a video of funny television bloopers before trying to solve the puzzle. The second group went straight to work. The laughing groups were consistently better at solving the puzzles (another word for "problems") than the folks who went straight to work.

Family-systems experts suggest that the only way to impact a stuck system is to maintain a nonanxious presence in it, to do more than just react. Many youth workers find themselves in a highly reactive posture, blaming their senior pastors or critical parents for "making them mad." But youth workers who successfully initiate change in their churches have learned to maintain a playful detachment from those triggers that cause people to spiral into negativity and reactive blaming.

4. We Instill Stories and Metaphors.

The Hopi proverb is right: "The one who tells the stories rules the world." Diana Butler Bass writes, "The primary skill for leaders is the ability to clarify and reconceptualize stories, essentially to be one of the best storytellers around the campfire." If we want to create a climate of transformation, we'll do so by creating an "intentional mythology" for our ministries.

Consider the positive mythology created around a building project. There's the thrill of visiting the site, seeing the progress from week to week, walking people through the skeleton frame, imagining what each room will be used for. Though there's a mess everywhere, though the space is totally unusable, excitement still grows because *the mess is seen as part of the process*.

Every youth ministry is either buoyed up or dragged down by its mythology, by the stories and metaphors used to describe it. For most youth ministries, this mythology is almost entirely accidental. But for those of us who lead, we have the

power (and responsibility) to craft the stories that will define the climate of our ministries.

Leaders of thriving youth ministries are harbingers of what God is doing and is about to do. They're the bards of their youth ministries, telling youth and leaders the tales of who they are and what God is up to. They're the environmental experts, cultivating the ethos by seeding it with stories and metaphors that affirm that, although the picture is not yet completed, signs of progress are popping up all around.

5. We Embrace Ritual and Traditions, Signs and Symbols.

Allentown Presbyterian Church is a strange place. With about five hundred people in worship on an average Sunday, this small-town church in New Jersey often has more than two hundred youth each week attending its youth groups. Led mostly by parents who never got the memo that kids didn't want them around, this extraordinary ministry has the kind of climate most youth ministries long for.

The first time I visited, I was struck by the power of its rituals and traditions, little things like lighted candles on the tables (even in the presence of junior-high boys) and the way the tables were magically taken down by kids after dinner. But one tradition gave me (and anyone who walked through the door) a powerful picture of who this group is: every person who entered the room was greeted in the same way—with cheers and applause. Is it any wonder the biggest problem facing this ministry is what to do with all the kids who keep coming?

Each year on the first weekend of May, our youth ministry sponsors an event we affectionately call Crud Day. To the outside observer, it's nothing more than a typical messy youth group event. But for us, it's one of the most important rites of passage. You see, Crud Day takes place on the afternoon of Confirmation Sunday, when the sixth-graders who've just completed the confirmation process make their profession of faith before the entire church. As these youth move from childhood into the youth group, we mark their transition by putting them on teams with youth from all the other grades. The mud, shaving cream, and water balloons give a clear message, "You are one of us. You belong."

Closely related to rituals and traditions are signs and symbols. Signs and symbols have a way of locking in a group's rituals and traditions. Some groups create a logo; others invite you to paint their names, their

handprints, or their favorite Scriptures on the wall of the youth room; still other churches collect pictures for years and present a photo album of memories to students when they graduate.

When we dropped our youngest daughter off at college this year, I couldn't help but notice the signs and symbols she placed around her room—posters of music groups, pictures of friends, *and* the silver communion cup she was given at our church's senior banquet as a reminder not only of her identity in Christ but also of her connection to her church family.

Rituals and traditions, signs and symbols help establish a climate in which community identity can be cultivated.

Changing Culture— Reflection Questions

1. If you were to give a weather report of the climate of your current youth ministry, what would that report be?
2. What stories or metaphors define the culture of your youth ministry?
 - a) a story of a time when "God showed up" in your youth ministry
 - b) a story of unexpected grace in your youth ministry
 - c) a story of a young persons' unlikely connection to your church

Taking the Long View

In *Where The Heart Waits*, Sue Monk Kidd's words about the transformation of the heart are equally true about the transformation of an organization: ". . . new life comes slowly, awkwardly, on wobbly wings" (Monk, 177). I have watched it happen in our own ministry where I have been a poster child for Winston Churchill's curious definition of success: "One failure after another. . . with enthusiasm!"

Whether you are starting from scratch, renovating an established youth ministry, or hoping to breathe new life into a place that has been stuck for years, remember as you begin, that "everything can look like a failure in the middle." And whether you are a "lifer" who plans to work with teenagers until your dying breath or someone who plans to provide support from a distance, I invite you to join in the chorus calling the church back to investing in equipping a generation of young disciples who can transform their homes, their schools, their churches, their workplaces, and their worlds for Christ.