

## Three Youth Group Plants: what we learned from each one

### First One

This was a church plant so there was no prior youth ministry and it was a small church with about 60 people on any given Sunday. They had several visitors with teens, but when they asked the pastor what they had for youth, he could only answer; “a monthly pizza night” or something similar. Those families never came back and none of the families in the church had teenage kids.

I had interned there and after five months he asked me to come on for the youth and children’s ministries. I had to work part time, but the hope was by offering more, families who visited would stick. I had no helpers or budget. We were renting a daycare for Sunday services and the pastor also worked part time.

Lesson List:

1. Get to know your students. I had two middle school sisters who were both smart and active at school. On the surface, they looked like kids that would go far in life. In time it surfaced that they had both been repeatedly molested and those issues and those related to them made life very tough for them. The adage, “you can’t judge a book by its cover”, was true.
2. It takes about two years to earn enough respect with your church before they value you, trust you, and support your efforts. You can accelerate that by formal and informal meetings with parents and other adults or prolong it if you make a few big mistakes especially if they involve money.
3. Make sure you have a safety net of people outside your church to support you and understand you (i.e. other youth pastors).
4. Develop another safety net of people who can help you with student’s issues (like the molestation and other heavies you will face at some point). Your lead pastor should be able to help you get started with that, if not, the local school counselors could be a good starting point.
5. Have a real reason for everything you do. The end goal is always lifelong followers of Jesus (Disciples). But you have so many different starting points with your students that you must do things that connects with them were they are. It may look like pure fun from the outside but your goal of establishing relationships with them or among them is a very valid reason for the event as well.
6. Be creative in your preaching/teaching small group formats. Keep them guessing!
7. Be flexible on your building use and plan way in advance to be in harmony with the rest of the church ministries.
8. Invest in volunteers as soon as you get any!

## **Number Two**

This was an effort from three churches in the same geographic area to start a cooperative youth group. They felt none of them were big enough to support their own youth group but they were comfortable working together I was paid a stipend to coordinate this. By this time, I was a nonprofit ministry traveling, speaking, and leading short term mission teams. I had two other youth workers who committed to work with me to lead this and each church gave us some volunteers (about ten total). Between all the churches there were 8 students ranging from middle school to running start ( a program where High School students can take community college classes while still in school).

Lesson List:

1. Invest in what you have (students and leaders) even if it doesn't seem to head in the direction you would have planned. The group of students enjoyed it right off away and started to invite their friends (we called it the locker room and all the leaders were coaches). As it grew, it got older (the kids in running start brought the most friends and many of them were 18 plus) and after some months of training, one of the churches pulled out. They figured now that they had some experience, they would actually start their own. They had a few new kids coming along with the couple of original ones so in one way it was a church split and in another it was a church plant. As the group got bigger (close to 25 after about a year and a half) we were more of a young adult group and able to deal with a lot of the tougher issues. Many of them ended up making things right with the Lord but also the people of their past (often a church or family situation). They started to head back to their roots and their original churches. It started to get young again but still about 25 in number. Some of the original college-aged ones got married and them felt called to ministry so after 2.5 years they took over and were the youth pastors there for about the next five years.
2. Provide ministry opportunities for the students right away. Ways they can help the Kingdom go forward: base this on what they're capable of. As a result, they helped at a food bank, preached, worship etc. in the weekly meetings, a local serve day and summer mission trips locally as well as out of the area/country.
3. Communicate everything six times in at least three different ways. That is for parents, students, and the staff you work with. No one gets it the first time.
4. If you spend your few funds wisely, more will come later. Know the income levels of your families and plan accordingly. You may have to be very creative to make things affordable.
5. Put your dates out as soon as possible. Whoever gets to the calendar first wins; win this one by knowing your local, school, community, and church calendars really well.

## **Number Three**

This was a church of about 125 who had tried youth pastors, but they would only stick around for months or a couple of years. When they left, it would all fall apart, and the next youth pastor would struggle getting it going again because the students didn't trust new youth pastor. They had not had a youth ministry for about six months at this time, and they knew things weren't going well with their families with teens. They asked me if I could reboot it but by training volunteers to lead it as they were not going anywhere. They were solid, long-term community members, and either had teens or had raised them.

For this I met with the volunteers for six weeks on Sunday afternoons prior to their launch.

1. Make everything a bite-sized and meaningful piece for your volunteers. This encourages them to be long term and maintain balance in their lives with work, family, and ministry.
2. Address crisis issues before they happen: anger, wounds, cutting, stress, suicide etc. before they happen. Don't just respond to it when there is a school shooting or suicide in the community.
3. Become a part of the community and schools as much as it is realistic with your schedule and church expectations.
4. Find out who you are and recruit volunteers for what you are not. I am the evangelist/administration guy. Pastoral and servers were gold in our ministry to provide the glue for the students once we reached them at some level. Our saying was, "I was the catcher--they were the keepers".
5. Break your gatherings into smaller groups as soon as you have the leadership to do.

Of course, there is more but hopefully this is helpful as you get ready to grow and plant in your new location!

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