

DEVELOPING A YOUTH MINISTRY STRATEGY IN THE SMALLER CHURCH

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The young youth minister jumps in the van ready to take the youth to their first fall retreat and he asks the adult riding with him, “where is this camp located?”

This question and others like it represent the perceived norm when it comes to planning and implementing youth ministry at the local church. The “youth director,” as some proclaim, “just plays with the kids each week!” The sad fact is, this perception is fulfilled by the lack of direction and adequate planning we youth ministers/volunteers project from time to time. Many of us like to focus on the relational aspect of the ministry and “let slide” the administrative responsibilities that accompany the job. The fact that you may minister to ten youth or fewer does not diminish the need to know where you are going and how you will be getting there. The old saying, *if you fail to plan, you plan to fail*, still holds true. This chapter will provide some insights as to developing a strategy for your youth ministry. Some issues I want to burn in to your ministry mentality deal with vision for the ministry, the use of a youth ministry council, the *Lead Teams* concept, developing a team of youth volunteers, and some organization options that are available to you.

People are attracted to organizations that have clear, defined goals and purposes. In this way they know what is expected of them and where the organization is going.

Vision/Purpose Statement
“Where there is no vision,
the people are unrestrained.”
Proverbs 29:18 (NASB)

To dispel the perception that youth ministry is an entertainment time for young people, a statement of purpose for the ministry must be envisioned, developed and articulated by the church, adult leaders and youth. Adults and youth must work together to decide what the youth ministry of their church will accomplish. Using scripture and the over-all purposes of the local

church as a guide, a vision or purpose statement can be created. Doug Fields in his book *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* uses three chapters to set forth the importance and content of this purpose statement.¹

Your statement needs to be clear and concise so everyone, adults and youth, can understand why “Example A” Baptist Church’s youth ministry exists. Interview youth, adult leaders, parents and your pastor for their ideas as well. Compile all the information and “boil it down” to some simple phrases that can be easily remembered. An example might be, *“The youth ministry of Example A Baptist Church strives to reach unchurched youth with the gospel of Christ and to grow them as disciples in order for them to be equipped to lead others to Christ.”*

Once you have your statement developed on paper, get the word out to the church via mail-outs, posters, t-shirts, website and any reports made to the church either verbally or written.

Encourage your leadership and youth to be familiar with the statement so they can verbalize it to others in the congregation and the community when the opportunity arises.

A vision statement will also be useful as a volunteer attraction. People are attracted to organizations that have clear, defined goals and purposes. In this way they know what is expected of them and where the organization is going.

Another positive aspect of the purpose statement is the congregation sees the ministry as a vital element of the overall church. Adults will be able to understand that the youth program is actually planning events with a desired outcome in mind, which compliments the overall mission/vision for the youth ministry.

Also, planning becomes *intentional* not

haphazard. If an activity does not fit in the purpose statement, that activity is discarded. In this way your ministry becomes *purpose* driven not *activity* driven. Our teenagers are busy enough without planning some meaningless program, activity or event for them to attend which has no relevance to the overall objectives of the youth ministry. Parents will also appreciate knowing *why* the youth ministry exists and what kind of activities will be offered to their children.

As you know, in some sports a team's mission is to score

more goals, runs, or points than the other team. Plays are developed to help them accomplish this task and to keep the opposition from scoring. Once everyone on the team knows the plan, the team pulls together to implement the plan and fulfill their purpose. If everyone associated with the youth ministry knows what is expected of them and where they are going, the team will be able to minister together more effectively in their community, schools, and homes.

The Youth Ministry Council

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. Proverbs 15:22 (NIV)

After you have developed your ministry purpose statement, the next step will be to create a Youth Ministry Council. The term *ministry* is used to emphasize the fact that the youth ministry council is doing more than planning events. They are providing ministry opportunities for their youth and parents. The prime responsibilities of the council are to *plan* and *evaluate* events based on the purpose statement of the youth ministry. The council also deals with issues and items that may come up during the year that may not relate to events that are on the calendar. *Leadership training* should also be an integral part of the youth ministry council process. Let's take a closer look at the development of

this important committee.

Depending on the size of your group, the council may be constructed in several ways. Some churches use *adults* for this planning team. Others use a mixture of *adults and youth*. Still a third way is to make it a *youth only* council. Of the three options mentioned above, the mix representation is the one I find most helpful.

When youth are fully integrated into the planning and implementing part of the mix, they gain much needed experience and are encouraged by the guidance and support provided by the adults in the process.

When adults do all the planning, youth are less likely to feel invested in the event and thus, their participation will not be as strong, either. On the other hand, when

youth are fully integrated into the planning and implementing part of the mix, they gain much needed experience and are encouraged by the guidance and support provided by the adults in the process.

The youth ministry council can be as big or as small as you deem necessary. The adults who serve on the council can be any one who is interested in working with the ministry. However, adults who work in a volunteer position with the youth ministry program areas (Missions, Music, Sunday School, Discipleship Training) are great to use for council members. They know the program and are familiar with events that have taken place in the past. A couple of parents are also asked to serve in the planning process. The youth members of your council may be made up of students from each grade or a combination if your numbers are smaller. These students can be selected by election, interview, or outright enlistment. If election is the chosen method, work out a way where *character* is more of a determining factor than *popularity*. For example, students can fill out a nomination form, which allows them to state the reasons *why* they want to be on the youth ministry council. Students then vote on the answers given instead of the popularity of the person. If you interview potential students, your graduating seniors can be part of this process along with selected adults. Also, you may choose to enlist students directly based on the maturity (spiritual and personal) and potential

of the individual. No matter what, be sure the council has youth represented on it. In the book, *Youth Ministry That Transforms*, Dr. Dave Rahn, professor of education ministries at Huntington College states, “youth don’t simply want to watch youth ministry being done to them; they also want to step into their roles as co-ministers in the lives of their peers.”² Rahn hits a home run with his statement regarding this generation of students and their need to experience the Christian life, which includes ministering to their friends. Serving on the council is one of the ways they can gain experience and develop a ministry mindset.

After the council has been selected, work can begin on planning events for the new year. One vital tool for planning is a survey of some type. There are several you may obtain either in print form or via computer software. Youth Specialties has a resource entitled, *Incredible Questionnaires for Youth Ministry*, published by Zondervan. There are several surveys contained in this publication that will help your council decide what direction needs to be taken in planning events and topics to study for your program.³ In the book, *Planning Youth Ministry from Boot Up to Exit*, published by Lifeway, a more detailed survey is included in this resource including a comprehensive survey to discover the needs of your teenagers. Also included is a computer disk that allows the data to be entered into the software and easily tabulated for interpretation and reporting to the various groups within the youth ministry.⁴ After you have given out the survey and then tabulated the results, the youth ministry council is ready to begin the process of planning events. An initial retreat is a great idea to get everyone together to discuss and plan for the new year. If at all possible, make the retreat an overnight at some state park or location off church property. This event will begin to build unity in the group and spark excitement for future planning retreats. You will also need a copy of the church calendar to guide your planning so events will not conflict with other church-wide activities. In smaller churches, space

is also a premium and the youth ministry council needs to work with the other organizations of the church to insure that the space is used to its fullest capacity. If all the events for the new church year have not been planned, then tentatively set up the events and discuss the dates and space needed with the pastor or church council. If a church council does not exist, then communication with the pastor is essential in working out event dates for the youth ministry. Themes for the new year may also be worked out during this retreat. An evaluation process of the past year’s events can be inserted into the retreat schedule to assist in the planning process as well. After the retreat, the youth ministry council should expect to meet at least once a month to follow up on events that are planned and to deal with non-calendar issues that may come up.

To add more depth to the council meeting agenda, prepare some leadership training activities for the students. Curriculum is available that can give you tips on activities and Bible studies to encourage leadership development. Dennis McCluen and Chuck Wysong have written a book published by Zondervan entitled, *The Student Leadership Training Manual for Youth Workers*. They have divided their material under the topics of: (1) Life as a Leader; (2) Peer Ministry; (3) Servant Teams and (4) Program Planning Teams.⁵ This book is an excellent resource to begin the process of training your teenagers for leadership in the ministry. Now that the calendar is planned, the next step is to enlist youth and adults to plan and staff the events.

Lead Teams

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?” Exodus 18:13-14 (NIV)

One of the major reasons vocational and volunteer youth ministers leave the profession is *burn out*. In the book, *Youth Ministry That Transforms*, Merton Strommen discusses the results of a multi-denominational survey administered several years ago, which speaks to this very issue of *burn out* in ministry. Strommen cites several reasons for burn out especially among youth ministers from smaller churches with 40 students or fewer. One of the main reasons is the lack of ability to delegate responsibilities to others.⁶ Youth ministers and volunteer

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youth workers cannot continue to carry the major burden of responsibility in the youth ministry and be expected to remain vibrant and effective in *all* areas of their work. At this point an old concept for Baptists has taken on new significance. The *Lead Teams* concept is the revised term we use for committee work in our ministries. *Lead Teams* are designed to allow the youth minister to assign tasks to others while he/she is freed up to concentrate on other areas of ministry more in line with their gifts and calling in ministry. By being free of setting up rooms or buying soft drinks for the next meeting, the minister is able to focus more on relationship building with the students and adults.

The purpose behind *Lead Teams* is to enable “ministers to equip church members to do the work of the ministry” as expressed in Ephesians 4:11-12. The minister’s time can be transformed from event manager to areas of ministry more unique to their calling and ability. The *Lead Teams* concept enables the youth minister (or

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volunteer youth worker) to better balance their time on a regular basis.⁷ This concept is especially important to the part-time minister or youth director that may be bi-vocational and have family obligations. “Responsibilities are spread around as lay leaders are given opportunities to use their

gifts and calling in service to the youth ministry. Finally the church benefits as lay leaders and ministers are working side by side utilizing their gifts and abilities.”⁸

As you begin the process of developing the teams, be sure you talk over the strategy with your pastor. After he has been consulted, you are ready to share the vision with the youth, parents and church.

Lead Teams can be set up in the smaller churches with a couple of adults and youth formulating one team. One of the adults on the lead team should be a person who knows of

your passion and vision for ministry and has some experience in the youth ministry. This person could be a volunteer who works in one of the ministry areas (Sunday School, Discipleship Training, Music/Worship, Missions). The other adult can be one of your parents or interested adults in your congregation. As for the youth on the team, allow an older and a younger teenager to work together, if possible. This arrangement can build relationships between the age groups thus creating a sense of unity within the fledgling, but growing, youth ministry. One other note, senior adults are a great resource for *Lead Teams*. The inter-generational benefits will go a long way to help your ministry. These “seasoned citizens” have a lot of experience and time to give to help the youth of the church.

As the new church year gets set to begin, invite all youth, parents and interested church members to an informational meeting about activities for the youth ministry. Serve

a pizza dinner and use the time to promote the events of the new year. The theme should also be introduced along with some goals for the program in the coming year. Paper or poster board will be on display with the different events, dates of event, a brief description and lines where adults

and youth may write their names. Encourage the youth and adults to move around and select the event(s) they would like to help plan and work. A key point to keep in mind is that people will sign up for (and be more invested in) events that interest them. You will find adults will work more effectively in areas where they have experience. This type of volunteer “event fair” allows more people to work in the youth ministry program. Adults get to know each other and experience the joys of working together side-by-side with the young people. The job responsibilities are spread out among more individuals therefore reducing the *overload* on one person or minister. The youth are provided an environment where they can learn from caring adults on how to take on responsibility and organize events. In this day of the postmodern teenager, our youth want to *experience* life not just hear or read about it.⁹ We need to provide them *hands-on* opportunities where they are giving of themselves to others in the context of the Gospel. Showing slides from the previous year’s youth ministry events along with personal testimonies from youth and adults can close the meeting. These personal testimonies provide encouragement to other teenagers and adults to become involved in future ministry opportunities in the coming year.

After the meeting all the information is collected and a *Lead Team* meeting is scheduled for all teams. We meet on Sunday every other month after the morning worship hour. I provide lunch for a couple of bucks and the teams begin to plan for their specific event. I have budget information along with tasks to be accomplished and a time line for each event. We meet for about an hour and I am free to float around from team to team to give advice and opinions about the plans as they are developed by each team. Once a Lead Team event has been implemented and evaluated, that Lead Team ceases to exist. So, in other words, after a team has completed their event, they no longer need to meet. They are then free to assist or join another lead team if they so choose.

After the teams are finished with their

event you will need to have an evaluation time to go over the pros and cons of the event. You can give them some congrats at this time but a letter and some recognition, maybe in the worship service, will be huge in getting them to sign up again next year. Emphasize their vital part in the ministry to youth at the church and be thankful for their service.

If you do not want to utilize the *Lead Teams* concept for all your events during first year, limit the number of teams to only the *largest* events. In this way you can see how the process works on a limited scale and make adjustments if needed for the next year. For a detailed look at the scope and plan for the *Lead Teams* concept see the book *Planning Youth Ministry from Boot Up to Exit* by Richard Ross.¹⁰

Developing a Youth Ministry Team

One Sunday morning a pastor announced to the congregation the need for a teacher in the Senior High Sunday School Department. After the service a man volunteered to teach the class. Over the next several years this volunteer was more of a hindrance than an asset to the ministry. Eventually he was asked to resign in a way that was not handled very well.

How many times have we gotten close to the beginning of a new church year and find some positions not filled? Our first reaction is to become frustrated at the congregation for not “stepping up to the plate” to lend assistance. With one week to go before the year begins, we pressure anyone to take the job, hand them a book, and give them our phone number if they have any questions. More times than not this is our “modus operandi” in selecting leadership for our teenagers. If this has been your way of selecting leadership, let me encourage you to give a great deal of thought to this process and consider some of the suggestions that follow. Not that they are perfect, but they have been found to be sound advice from others who share our pilgrimage.

At the start of the leadership enlistment

process, your pastor will need to lend his/her support via his preaching and teaching. His/her influence, through sermons and casual conversations on service and congregational responsibilities, will help to establish a foundational mindset for *servant leadership*. You probably have heard it said before that “20% of the congregation does 80% of the work.” Equipping the members to use their gifts and talents in service to the church is a major key for any church’s pastoral leadership. As the *servant* mindset grows within the congregation, you will have more and more people express with you an interest in working in the youth ministry. Trust me, they will! If, however, no one verbally volunteers to work in the youth area, take note of individuals who seem to work well with and relate to the youth. You can also ask the teenagers whom they would suggest as teachers in the ministry. They have a keen sense of character when it comes to sizing up adults. Adults who are currently working in the ministry are also a great resource in providing names of people to enlist. They may know individuals who would like to work but *need to be asked*. When new members join your church, check them out as to their previous experience in working with teenagers. God brings people to churches to assist the congregation in their mission.

After you have a list of names, send them a letter telling them you have noticed they have a positive relationship with teenagers. You ask them to prayerfully consider working with the youth and invite them to sit in on some of their sessions. This invitation is non-threatening and gives them a way to see how the program works. The youth will also be introduced and become familiar with the adult volunteer. You may also want to send out a general letter to all the adults in the church advertising for leaders. The letter would express general expectations for volunteers and an invitation to “check out” the ministry. Just a side note at this point.

Senior adults are a great resource in developing your team. They have a rich background in many areas. They also have the time to give and the *inter-generational* benefits will be great.

As with any youth ministry, you will have many volunteer needs. You will need adults with resources (houses, boats, vans, food, water balloon launchers!), teaching skills (Sunday School, Discipleship Training, mission and small groups) and time (all-nighters, camps, weekend retreats, Youth Evangelism Conference, mission trips). Once enlisted, what will you do with these adults who volunteer to work in your youth ministry? How will they be utilized in the youth ministry’s overall objectives and mission? A plan needs to be established that will enable you to help them develop into effective adult leaders in your youth ministry.

As you meet with these individuals you can give them an application to fill out on the opportunities within the youth ministry. This way they will be able to see what is available and thus *plug in* where they feel most comfortable and gifted. I

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have linked new volunteers with seasoned adults to allow them to *learn* in an apprentice-type (mentoring) relationship. After an initial trial period, the volunteer is given the

opportunity to work on their own. Communication is always a key in keeping tabs on how all the adults are getting along with their responsibilities. Doug Fields has his volunteer leaders go through a 10-step process before they are given a position in the ministry.¹¹ You may think that this type of thorough process is “overkill” but it portrays an intent on developing good leaders. You can pick and choose various aspects from his list and adapt others to fit your needs.

Volunteer staff meetings are a must and can be designed to share information for growth and to help develop unity in the group. Staff meetings can take place anywhere or anytime but need to include several aspects. The meetings should be posi-

tive in nature not focusing on gripping and complaining. Sharing what God is doing in the groups keeps the conversation and tone of the meeting both upbeat and positive in nature. *Prayer* is also a key component in these meetings. All of what we do must be lifted up to God for God's blessings and guidance. Praying for each other also develops unity within the youth ministry leadership team. Another aspect of the meeting can focus on *leadership training*. It is important that these times of leadership training be focused and substantive. It is best to choose only one aspect of leadership development to address during each meeting. You may want to have a special guest come in to give a different perspective on the selected leadership issue to be addressed at each specific meeting date.

As the youth ministry staff develops, you can also provide them with a broader youth ministry perspective by taking them to local, state or national seminars. In addition, local church associations may provide periodic training events for teachers throughout the year. Also, on the state level, conferences are held on a regular basis to assist the youth minister in leadership development. The Virginia Baptist Mission Board has a team of Youth Resource Specialists made up of experienced, seasoned, professional youth ministers available to assist your church in developing its leaders in youth ministry. For more information on how one of these specialists might be able to help your youth ministry, contact Dr. Kenneth W. Dibble, Youth Ministries Consultant at the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. Dr. Dibble can be reached at 800-255-2428 (toll-free in Virginia) or direct at 804-915-5000. Or you can email him at: kendibble@vbmb.org. In addition, Youth Specialties, a national resource organization for youth ministry, holds two major, week-long, national conferences and many one- and two-day regional seminars. These national conferences blend worship, seminars (on a variety of topics) and a resource

fair to give you ideas for and encouragement in your ministry. The one- and two-day seminars focus on materials along with one or two issues of concern in youth ministry. To find out more about Youth Specialties you may go to their web site at: www.youthspecialties.com or contact them directly at 1-800-776-8008.

If your church has the resources available, you may consider enlisting a summer intern to work with your youth ministry. You can make your request to the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, North American Baptist Mission Board, local college or university Baptist Student Union or seminary. In Virginia, the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond is located in Richmond and can possibly be a reservoir of potential candidates for a summer youth ministry intern position. BTSR can be reached on the web at: www.btsr.edu or you can contact them directly at 804-355-8135. A college or seminary student can provide much needed assistance and leadership to the church. As well, the intern gains invaluable leadership experience while not shouldering the entire load of responsibility for the youth ministry during their summer internship. As well, Youth Specialties has information about using interns from "interview to exit" in the book *Youth Ministry Management Tools*.¹²

One last important point to note related to staff development is the necessity of conducting a criminal background check on all your adults working in the youth ministry.

One last important point to note related to staff development is the necessity of conducting a criminal background check on *all* your adults working in the youth ministry (or any ministry in the church for that matter!). There are adults who will be drawn to your ministry in order to be close to teenagers. For the safety of the children, the sanity of the parents and for protection for the church, you need to put in place a policy for dealing with this problem should it come up. A resource to give you background help is from an organization called Church Law and Tax Report. The resource is entitled, *Reducing the Risk of Sexual Abuse in Your Church*¹³ by Richard R. Hammar. This resource cov-

ers an extensive array of legal issues in the church and would be of great benefit to all aspects of the church's ministry. If you would like to order a copy of this book, you can contact them directly at 704-841-8066. Another valuable resource is entitled, *Better Safe Than Sued*¹³ written by Jack Crabtree. This resource, as well, covers a wide range of legal issues in youth ministry.

One final thought focuses on the reality of burn out in youth ministry. Burn out, as has been noted, is one

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of the enemies of the youth minister. If we choose not to use a team of adults to assist us in the ministry, we will have to deal with this issue sooner than later. Building a team of adults to minister alongside the staff will create a more effective *minister* and *ministry* in the local church.

Ministry Resource and Fellowship Organization Opportunities

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25 (NIV)

One of the highlights of the ministry is the fellowship you receive in a local youth ministry organization. I belong to a group that meets once a month to pray, discuss new resources, share special program dates, (concerts and conferences) and plan events for our youth such as *See You At the Pole*. If you live in a smaller town, and there is no organization in place, contact your local Baptist Associational Office to discover the names of the youth ministers (and/or volunteer youth workers) in your area and the names of the churches in which they serve. I served in a church in Kentucky where there were only four paid youth ministers in the association of 55 churches. I used the Baptist Association to contact youth directors and developed a support and resource group. We planned lock-ins and other trips for our teenagers and training events for the adults. We

became a close group as we met to pray for our young people, parents and each other. Our group was open to *all* denominations! Presbyterians, Methodists, Christian Church and Church of Christ ministers and volunteers were a regular part of the group. That group as well as the one I am a part of now has provided much needed support and encouragement in my ministry. If you do not have this support group in your area you are missing out on a much-needed ministry resource.

Most state conventions have established a youth minister's association to be a resource to the local church. These associations meet on a regular basis to conduct business, hold training workshops and renewal weekend retreats for youth ministers and volunteers. In Virginia, the state organization is called the Virginia Baptist Youth Minister's Association (VBYMA). For more information on the VBYMA and how you can become a member (or enlist their assistance in developing your church's ministry to youth) contact Dr. Kenneth W. Dibble, Youth Ministries Consultant at the Virginia Baptist Mission Board. Dr. Dibble can be reached at 800-255-2428 (toll-free in Virginia) or direct at 804-915-5000. Or email him at: kendibble@vbmb.org. Another benefit to these organizations is the contacts that can be made across the state. You can develop a network of leaders that can be used in a variety of youth ministry settings including: speaking, music/worship or small group events (DiscipleNow Weekends, True Love Waits Rally or See You At The Pole Rally). On a national scale, there is an organization called the *National Network of Youth Ministries*. This group seeks to network youth ministers from all denominational backgrounds across the nation. They are located in San Diego, California and their web site address is: www.youthworkers.net. You may also contact them direct at 1-858-451-1111. They are a great resource for materials, ministry trends and regional conference information.

The main point of this last section is to

develop some relationships with people *outside* your ministry who can provide encouragement and perspective on your ministry. You may have to create that fellowship on the local level on your own initiative, but the work spent to develop it will be of great benefit to your ministry in the long run.

I hope these pages have given you some encouragement about developing a strategy for doing youth ministry in your church. Not all ideas work in every location. Hopefully, you will be able to grasp some principles to use in your situation that will allow you to minister in a more effective manner.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does your youth ministry have a mission/vision or purpose statement? What is it? Could anyone in your church give a one-sentence explanation describing the youth ministry? If you were to write the statement for your youth ministry, what key elements would you want to include in this mission statement? Be specific.
2. Do you think a purpose statement would help your youth ministry? If so, how? If not, why?
3. What are some steps you need to take to put a purpose statement in place if you do not have one?
4. Do you have a planning group such as a Youth Ministry Council at your church? If not, who plans all the activities for the young people?
5. How are the youth ministry council representatives selected or elected? How many adults and youth serve on the council? Does the youth minister or volunteer youth coordinator have a say in who serves on the council?
6. How many activities are planned for your teenagers each year? How would you characterize the youth and adult involvement in assisting the youth minister or volunteer youth coordinator for these events?
7. Would you characterize yourself as a "lone ranger" minister or a "coach?" Why?
8. How many training events do you take your volunteers to each year? What would it take to do at least one event with several

of your volunteers this year? Focus on your obstacles and how to overcome them in order to provide the necessary training for your youth ministry volunteers.

9. Are you a part of a network of youth ministers in your area? What would it take on your part to start one?

10. If you are feeling burned out already, what would be some steps you need to take to relieve some of this pressure? Would the *Lead Teams* concept be a practical solution to alleviated some of the burden of the youth ministry responsibilities and enable you to focus on other aspects of youth ministry more in line with your unique gifts and calling? If you implemented the *Lead Teams* strategy in your youth ministry, what specifically would you be freed to concentrate on more in the coming year? Be specific.

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