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The RESPONSIBILITIES of a LEADER

So your willingness to “help out” with the young people really *is* a call and your motives, at least to some degree, are about serving God and loving people. Now what?

Perhaps you were given certain tasks to perform when you signed on as a youth leader. Good! It’s important to be clear about what is expected of you. But amidst these tasks there are certain essential responsibilities we have as we work with the young people. In this section we will examine five responsibilities, discovering practical ways of best fulfilling them.

Of particular importance to adolescents is friendship with an adult who sees in them potential they do not necessarily see in themselves. A relationship with such an adult during adolescence outweighs all other forms of youth ministry in terms of positive influence on youth development.¹

From experience...

During my first year as a youth pastor our leadership team was well organised, with each person having a task to perform. Toward the end of the year I listened to a message from an experienced pastor who said, "Since the church is primarily about people, we need to be looking for those who have people related gifts and putting them into leadership." That one sentence changed our ministry! We continued with the existing team - an effective youth ministry needs to be well organised, but we added a second leadership team - a pastoral leadership team who were given the responsibility of caring for each young person attending our ministry. Some of these people could barely "organise" their own lives! But they had outstanding "people gifts".

1. INSPIRE Them

Without passion, Christian faith collapses. And young people know it – which may be why many are not spending time in church.²

There is no doubt that passion is contagious and that faith is best caught rather than taught. When we look at effective leaders, Christian or not, who achieve great things, they all have this one quality in common – they are passionate.

Scripture contains a number of examples of passionate leaders attracting passionate followers. We saw earlier how a passionate **Elijah** stirred up a similar passion in **Elisha**,³ but another example is found in the "second Elijah" named **John the Baptist** whose inspired preaching drew many out into the wilderness to listen and respond through baptism.⁴ Equally, in his letters we clearly see **Paul's** passion that rubbed off on the younger leaders he inspired such as **Timothy**⁵ and **Titus**.⁶

Suppose I arrived at your church to lead the youth ministry and I was given permission to choose a whole new leadership team. I would proceed to interview each member of the current team and ask them just two questions. The first question I would ask is this: "How do you feel about young people?" Clearly if you said, "Well, to be honest they annoy and frustrate me!" then chances of your being on my team would quickly evaporate. But if you told me that you love them, and that you derive a

sense of satisfaction and joy in dealing with them then I would be thinking that maybe I'd want you to stay on the team.

You see, I want people on my team who passionately care about young people because that passion will be evident to the young people themselves and it will inspire them to respond to your leadership.

The second question I would ask is this: "How do you feel about Jesus?" If your answer was purely theological such as, "Well I believe He is the Son of God, that He came to earth as a man and lived a sinless life before dying an unjust death for our sins upon a cross and being raised once more to life before ascending into heaven to be with the Father..." – I would stop you. What I was asking was "How do you feel about Jesus?" You clearly have a good grasp of theology – excellent! That is very important. But what I want to know is if your belief extends from your head down into your heart. I want to hear your passion!

The reason is that young people will tune out your words unless they sense your passion. It is your passion that will capture their attention long before your good theology (and please don't think I'm downplaying the importance of good theology.)

So, if I sense passion then you are on the team! But a word of warning before your interview. Don't try to *create* passion. Created passion is called "hype" and I can sense it almost as well as young people can! The moment you try to create a sense of God-inspired passion it dissipates into emptiness in the hearts of your hearers.

Passion is not something that is worked up. It is something that bubbles up. It is the outflow or overflow of our relationship with Christ. There is only one way to display God inspired passion and it not by trying to sound passionate! It is by spending time with Him and getting to know Him personally. As you do this, gradually, you will communicate with a greater sense of passion, and here is the true test of whether or not it is "you" or God: you will be largely unaware of any change. You will speak as you always have spoken and may or may not be aware of a deeper sense of reality, but others will notice and, much to your surprise, comment on it.

Which are the people who have influenced us most? Not the ones who thought they did, but those who had not the remotest notion that they were influencing us. In the Christian life [inspiration] is never conscious; if it is conscious it ceases to have this unaffected loveliness which is the characteristic of the touch of Jesus.⁷

Let me now illustrate the effect of this upon young people. Have you ever met someone who loved Jesus and after speaking with them you went away inspired?! Inspired to love Jesus more yourself – inspired to read His the Bible more often, to worship Him more deeply and to pray to Him more often. The reason this occurred was *not* because they told you: “Read your Bible, worship, and pray more than you do now!” No, the change came about because something (or Someone) in them connected with something deep in you and stirred it into life.

You were inspired, and when we are inspired we are changed.

From experience...

A regional youth director once said to me “Let me tell you about our most effective youth worker.” Of course immediately I imagined them to be young and vibrant, dressed in the latest clothes playing a guitar and driving a van! To my surprise he said, “There is this sixty year old woman...” He went on to explain that when young girls want to talk about issues such as boys and parents and school, she will listen patiently and intently to everything they have to say. Then when she speaks and shares Jesus with them, they hang on her every word! Quite simply, she inspires them with her passion, and chances are she had no idea she was doing it.

2. BELIEVE IN Them

There are many examples in Scripture of God believing in people, even though in the eyes of people they had little to commend them. We mentioned just a few of these earlier: **Moses** was not a communicator,⁸ **Gideon** considered himself “the least”⁹ and **Jeremiah** thought he was too young.¹⁰ We also saw the power of belief when Barnabas believed **John Mark** deserved another chance.¹¹ These people needed someone to believe in them in order to get them to take on the mission God had placed before them. Often we see God Himself personally reassuring them, and while God’s Spirit still does this today to the timid and weak, we have a responsibility as leaders to do our part in offering reassurance and encouragement.

Believing in our young people starts with believing they are the best young people in any youth group in the world! We are allowed to be biased of course the same way any proud parent is biased when talking about their children. Being objective is not the issue when we begin to compare them with young people in other youth groups. If we don't lead with a mindset that sees them as "the best", we may convey a lack of belief and even a spirit of criticism in the way we relate to them.

Believing in them also means we find a balance between realism and challenge. Low expectations mean that they never rise to meet their full potential, but if our expectations are too high we can leave them feeling discouraged and perhaps condemned.

Believing in them means we see them as capable and we assist them to achieve, confidently believing that they can. Belief is like passion – it is contagious and will inspire young people. Yet it can be tough to maintain when we are let down. When that happens we must resist the temptation to condemn our young people. Instead we must pray and ask God to rekindle our sense of belief before the next programme.

From experience...

At times I would take the place of a leader, leading their small group while they were having a week off. In doing so I would always bring with me a great sense of belief in the young people, conveying the assumption that they would be keen to learn and eager to pray for one another. At times the leader was later surprised at the degree to which their group showed a willingness to rise to my expectations. It's always easier to believe in people when you are not faced with the regular disappointment that can come through week to week contact.

3. VALUE Them

Valuing young people is a little different from believing in them. We believe in what young people can *do*; we value them for who they *are*. First and foremost we value them because they are made in the image of God and we choose to see them in this light *first* – not as someone who has a problem... or *is* a problem!

We value them by noticing them when they come to our programmes and noticing when they are not there. A simple message, commenting on their absence and asking after them, can do a lot to make a young person feel valued.

More than simply noticing, we value them by talking to them, listening to them, and giving them our time. Increasingly young people lack adults who show genuine interest and concern in their lives and in their wellbeing. A conversation in which we give them our full attention can do a great deal for their sense of self worth.

From experience...

The prison inmate looked me in the eye and recounted his recollection of his years in our youth group. "What I remember most" he said, "was that you always seemed to have time for us. You must have been busy but you would be out there playing basketball with us when we were hanging round the church after youth group or after the morning prayer meeting."

Another very simple but powerful way to let young people know we care is to make the effort to learn and use their name. It has been said that the most beautiful sound in someone's ear is the sound of their own name. Remembering and using someone's name says to them, "I value you enough to get to know you personally".

From experience...

I received a letter once from a young woman who had been in our youth ministry for about a year many years previously. She was now a youth pastor herself and had a question for me. "On my second night at youth group you came up to me and greeted me by name. I'd love to know how you did that." Some years after that I received an email from a friend in the UK saying they had met this same young woman who then proceeded to relate how on their second night at youth group I came up to them and greeted them by name! Interestingly what impacted this young woman all those years later wasn't the Bible studies or messages I spent hours working on, but the fact I showed them how valuable they were by simply using their name to greet them on their second visit.

All of us have a need to be valued, yet many young people are beset by a low sense of self worth that has often come about through not being valued by significant people in their lives. It is our responsibility to value them and in the process heal any sense they may have that they lack worth.

Remember, if we don't make a young person feel valued it will be harder for them to believe they are valued in the eyes of God.

4. AFFIRM Them

In the same way in which many young people lack a sense of value, they may also lack a sense of being capable or appreciated. Therefore one of the responsibilities of a leader is to look for opportunities to offer genuine and sincere appreciation and affirmation to them. There may be any number of people in their lives ready to criticise and condemn them – peers and siblings, and sadly even teachers and worse – parents. When we become affirmers we become an oasis of praise in a desert of criticism and negativity.

When offering affirmation to a young person, remember to be specific. If they have done something worthy of note, comment on what they did highlighting exactly what was so good and why. Don't just say "I liked the message you brought tonight" but say "I liked the way you used that illustration from your own life to make your point. It really made your message come alive!" Specific affirmation is more powerful than general affirmation.

CHECKLIST:

- ☐ I make an effort to talk to all young people individually.
- ☐ I let them know I missed them when they absent.
- ☐ I greet our young people by name each week.
- ☐ I take time to really focus and listen to the young people.
- ☐ I make sacrifices to help young people in need.

"Whether he was confronting a prostitute by a well in the middle of a hot afternoon, or leading his closest followers in a time of prayer and special communion, it is clear that Jesus' ministry strategy was relational. He was not some aloof leader, dipping down in the jungle periodically like Tarzan to scream at and kick a few natives before he returned to his ruling roost in the treetops. In Jesus we see a God who became flesh and "made his dwelling among us" ¹²

Seven Ways to Affirm

1. *Spend time with them doing something together.*
 2. *Offer spoken words of affirmation.*
 3. *Write a note or card, or send an email or text.*
 4. *Do something for them they will appreciate.*
 5. *Give them a small gift.*
 6. *Invite them to share food or a drink.*
 7. *Give them a hug or simply place a hand on their shoulder.*
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You may even feel their effort warrants going a step further by making them aware of some gifting they may have. Saying “I believe you may have a gift of preaching,” is more affirming than any feedback about a particular message, because the focus is on who they *are* more so than what they *did*.

When offering affirmation do so in a factual tone of voice otherwise it can sound like hype or flattery. Be sure to stand still and look at the person when you are affirming them as this conveys sincerity and honesty. Young people will sometimes think you are saying nice things because “that’s what youth leaders do”! Use these ideas to convince them that you mean what you say but never use them as techniques to say something you don’t really mean.

From experience...

I recall attending a conference and sensing for the first time a call to ministry. I spent some time talking with the head of a denominational youth ministry about training to be a youth pastor with them. At the end of our time together they said to me, “We can certainly do with good people like you to come and train with us!” Those words stuck with me and encouraged me in my self-doubt to take those first tentative steps toward vocational youth ministry.

5. CORRECT Them

*For the Lord corrects those
He loves, just as a father
corrects a child in whom
he delights.*

- Proverbs 3:12

At times it is the role of the leader to offer correction for something a young person has done. This might involve suggesting how to do a task better next time or encouraging them to be more effective in their walk with Christ.

We all know that we learn most from our mistakes but we cannot learn unless we are made aware of these mistakes. However, if these mistakes are not pointed out lovingly and without condemnation, we are likely to dismiss the correction and miss out on its benefits. Therefore, when it comes to correcting young people we must do so in a manner in which it will be well received and acted upon.

A way to do this is to offer correction hand in hand with affirmation. A suggested procedure is to firstly begin with affirmation for something done well. Point out what you like about what they did and why. Next offer correction, suggesting how it might be done even better in future. A good technique is to ask questions, after you have affirmed them, rather than give instruction ("What do you think of what you did?" "How might you do it even better next time?"). This helps them to feel as though the suggestions for improvement are their own ideas. Finally end with affirmation for something else done well or the overall impression you have from what they did.

Remember to be specific and constructive when offering correction. The aim is not to be critical of what has been done in the *past* but to correct what might be done in the *future*.

Emphasise the positive and downplay the negative whilst making your point clear. Allow them the opportunity to respond to any correction. Avoid an argument. You are simply giving your feedback. Leave it with them to reflect on, praying the Holy Spirit will bring enlightenment if need be.

CHECKLIST:

- ☐ I look for opportunities to affirm and encourage teens.
- ☐ When offering praise I make my affirmation specific.
- ☐ I offer affirmation sincerely without exaggeration or hype.
- ☐ When I correct I am careful to include affirmation.
- ☐ I offer correction lovingly and without condemnation.
- ☐ I correct the action and avoid criticising the person.

"If you place responsibility in the hands of one of your young people and are let down, take a deep breath and handle the situation calmly. Never criticise publicly. Rather take the person aside and offer correction and advice privately, all the while encouraging him or her to ask the question, "How will I do this differently next time?"¹³

For REFLECTION and DISCUSSION

1. Think of people who have really inspired you. What qualities did they possess that made them so inspirational? Make a list.
2. Think of someone you know who has really believed in you. It might be a parent, a teacher, a sports coach or a church leader. What did they do and how did their belief affect you?
3. A young person says to you that they hate the way they look and that they feel as though people treat them like a “nobody”. What would you say to them?
4. Read through the list of “Seven Ways to Affirm”. Which do you tend to use the most often? Which do you tend to prefer to be used by someone affirming you?
5. Discuss the statement “We should never criticise young people.” Do you agree or not? Can you think of any situation in which criticism might be justified?

Prayer:

Reflect on those areas where you fall short in fulfilling the responsibilities of leadership and ask God to help you change.

Practical insights which I will apply:

Endnotes:

3. The RESPONSIBILITIES of LEADERSHIP

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- ³ *1 Kings 19:19-21*
- ⁴ *Matthew 3:1-6*
- ⁵ *2 Timothy 1:8-14*
- ⁶ *Titus 2:1-15*
- ⁷ Chambers, O. *My Utmost for His Highest*, Barbour Publishing, 21 August
- ⁸ *Exodus 3:1-4:17*
- ⁹ *Judges 6:11-24*
- ¹⁰ *Jeremiah 1:1-10*
- ¹¹ *Acts 15:36-39*
- ¹² Robbins, D. *The Ministry of Nurture*, Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 1990, p180
- ¹³ Paprocki, J. *The Catechist's Toolbox: How to Thrive as a Religious Education Teacher*, Loyola Press, 2007, p.129