

TOPIC - “Dealing with Busy Students”, requested by the VFY guys, Tim and Mel...or is it Mel and Tim?

TITLE – “The Game Worth Playing”

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I don't know about you, but I'm tired of competing at a game that I can't win (only one exception, though – golf; I just seem to keep coming back for more). You know how it is – playing chess with your uncle who out maneuvers you every time with those stupid pawns. As a kid, playing basketball with your dad and always coming close, but never out on top. In Junior High, arm wrestling with your mom and being baffled how you could lose (yes, I admit this was me...but it didn't take long before I over powered...uh, my mom). Always coming up with the short end of the stick gets old quick and very discouraging.

Youth ministry today, has become somewhat of that game that we just can't seem to win. It seems like each time I talk with other youth guys in my area one topic always comes up – lack of commitment on the part of our students. We have all these great activities planned, powerful lessons prepared, and youth rooms prepped – and no one shows (or it seems to us at the time). We just can't win. They're at baseball, track, football, cheerleading, doing homework, field trips, karate, work, or babysitting – just to name a few! There we are carrying the short straw again. In our minds, youth group & God are put on the back burner.

Maybe, though, we're competing at a game we can't win – and if we try to win, we won't be able to sustain it. I can't compete with the schools and the range of activities and level of competition offered. I can't compete with the local Rec Centers and the hours made available. I can't compete with either of those in regard to facilities and resources. My website (which I think is pretty cool gbc4youth.gbcwestlake.org – nice plug, eh?) can't compete with Youtube or Facebook. Some youth ministries out there can...but if you're like me, I can't. The troubling thing, though to me, is not the lack of resources but rather, what I (the church) have to offer is much more valuable (pearl of great price/treasure in the field sound familiar) than anything else offered by whatever it is they are doing. That's what frustrates me.

Well then, perhaps my strategy needs to change. For my nine years as a youth pastor, my calendar has been filled with all-nighters (usually two a year), weekend retreats (also, two a year), missions trips (having to get bigger to get students to come), scavenger hunts, amusement parks, youth services, destination unknowns, service projects, and concerts...just to name a few. Perhaps you can identify with me – they aren't coming like they used to...and it's been tiring. Not only is my calendar filled with half-hearted, ill-prepared events, but also, so are those of my leaders. Not to mention, my four little children are only getting older and that whirlwind schedule is just around the corner for my family.

So, what do I do? Well, in my reading lately, I just can't get something out of my mind (*Pushing the Limits, Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry, and Hurt*). I am going to try something different this next school year, starting the Fall of 2009. The focus of our youth ministry will change, and I hope for the better. Our focus will be on relationships mainly between my leaders and our students. Here are some of the things I have read:

“They need adults who are aware of the power small, deliberate, and consistently authentic applications of relational concern, care, and nurture...the biggest need every student has is satisfied in one adult who is there for him or her.” (*Hurt*, page 171)

“Being relational doesn't depend so much on what you do, but on who you are. Healthy youth ministries have relational leaders who love students and want to get to know them. They have shepherds, not chaperones.” (*Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry*, page 100)

“ ‘It’s not the programs that yield the greatest impact. Your youth program is merely the framework that allows godly youth workers to build relationships with teenagers. It is through these relationships that the real impression is made.’ In other words, ‘you can influence people from afar, but true impact is made up close.’ “ (*Pushing the Limits*, page 134)

As I have been mulling this over in my mind, I have concluded that I cannot expect my leaders to keep this busy youth ministry schedule AND invest in the lives of our students. I need to do two things. First, I need to free them up to minister...I need to clear my portion of their calendar. Trust me, this is difficult for me on a couple fronts. These activities are usually what are measured and evaluated from within and without. What are people going to think if our youth group isn’t always doing things and going places...do we even need our youth pastor then? Also, these activities are “my babies”! I’ve worked hard on them and made them what they are. We’ve got great videos from them and I’ve had some of my greatest lessons on them, not to mention some good memories. But, it is effective? Now, I’m going to sit down with my leadership team and determine if any of these activities have a place and need to continue, but for the most part, we won’t be doing many of the things we have previously done.

Secondly, I need to invest in my leaders. I think we can all agree that we cannot possibly make a significant invest in ALL our students. I need my leaders to be “shepherds, not chaperones” as Fields puts it. Honestly, I think this makes ministry for them much more demanding (but also more rewarding, I might add). To a certain extent, it’s easy to set weekends and nights aside to attend an event. It is much more difficult to commit and invest in the lives of our students on a regular, consistent and meaningful way. But, I think, if a real and genuine transfer of truth and faith ownership is going to happen, it is going to happen in the context of relationships not activities.

Part of this investment in my leaders will need to be resourcing them for success. I need to know where their strengths, interests, and desires lie. I want them to understand how God has equipped them and made them for ministry. I want them to know and use these God-given desires whether they be sports, sewing, hiking, or whatever – use it for ministry. And, I’ll resource you. My budget will probably be used much differently than in the past. For instance, instead of spending money for our annual back-to-school all nighter, I can use that money to help pay the expenses that my leader will incur taking his guys hiking (which he loves to do).

I realize there is much more for me to mull over such as teaching plans, small group ministry, and a service emphasis; but one thing that I am growing more and more convinced of is that relationships is the game I can win...or rather, the game God has chosen to win with. Moses played it with Joshua, Elijah played it with Elisha, Jesus played it with his disciples, and Paul played it with Timothy – what happened...the next generation was won for the Lord! I’m ready to start playing this “new” game and seeing God win the hearts of my students!