



*Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry: A Personal and Practical Guide to Starting Right*  
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1

## **where do i start?**

committing to the essentials

In 1979 I was a rookie youth worker with no idea what I was doing. I took teenagers to R-rated movies; I had a Jacuzzi party in the baptismal because a 12-year-old thought it would be fun; I yelled at a group of parents; I taught a 15-year-old to drive using the church van, and I almost got arrested for having underage students in an over-21 club. Thankfully, a lot has changed, but it's been an eventful ride ever since.

As I write this, I'm still working with students in the church, and I love to talk about youth ministry, especially with new youth workers! Every day that I worked on this book, I thought and prayed especially for you. If you're just starting out, you're my favorite type of youth worker to help! (If you've been in the trenches for a few—or many—years, I love you too, and I'm confident you'll find help and encouragement in these pages.) I'm thrilled to play a role in your youth ministry journey. Whether you're

a paid staff member or a volunteer, the principles and ideas in this book are written to help you survive and thrive as you work with teenagers.

## Youth Ministry as a Marathon

One of my life goals (that I haven't accomplished yet) is to run a marathon. I've run several shorter races, but the 26.2 mile monster has eluded me so far. I watch them on TV, eagerly anticipating the day I finish a marathon.

I can't believe I just admitted that I watch marathons on TV!

Have you ever watched a marathon? They're inspiring. When I look into the eyes of the runners, I see two types of expressions. Standing behind the starting line, the seasoned marathoners are focused, mentally preparing for the task before them. They know what it takes to complete a race of this caliber, so they stretch to prepare their bodies, run in place to warm their muscles, and close their eyes to visualize the race's hills and mile markers. The vets know what's ahead. This isn't a party; it's abuse. And since they have to endure pain over the next several hours, the task is to run efficiently. Their bodies have even instructed their faces not to smile or to express any form of joy. Veteran runners know what they're doing.

The other runners are rookies. This is a fun group to watch. They typically stick together, taking in all the action from the free race T-shirts to the vendors selling running gear to the maps locating the portable toilets on the route. The rookies are excited, feeling good, smiling, bantering with others, enjoying the pre-race hype. Little do they know that their valuable adrenaline is being wasted long before the one-mile mark. Their actions are to be expected; after all, this is an exciting time, but it's also deceptive.

How so?

Watch the race from an elevated viewpoint. At the start, a mass of humanity moves forward as one group, bunched closely together, seemingly inseparable, until the second or third mile when the crowd begins to thin. By mile 10, some have decided to walk and are tempted to stop and watch a matinee. By mile 15, many are eating lunch early. After mile 20, only those who are the most prepared have a realistic chance of finishing well. Finishing is not only a matter of the body, but the emotions and the mind.

Running a marathon is a fitting picture of youth ministry. It's not an easy task within the church. If it were, we'd have more youth workers than ushers. Youth ministry is filled with long, tiring, often unrewarding, complex, unique, intense, humorous, joy-filled, and painful experiences. Many within the body of Christ have entered the youth ministry marathon, but many quit before long, having lost joy and satisfaction. They're wounded and weary.

## The Race before Us

I desperately want you to last in your ministry to students. Longevity in our field is uncommon. This is both unfortunate for the individuals who leave and tragic for the health of the church. The longer you work in youth ministry, the easier it becomes, and the better you minister to students. Quick departures have a lot to do with inadequate preparation and unrealistic expectations. But, like running, setting the proper pace assures long-term results and your ability to finish strong.

As I wrote this book, I kept two verses taped to my computer that served as the foundation for my writing. I want to share them with you.

*And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. (Hebrews 12:1)*

Youth ministry—like the Christian life—is a race that requires both training and endurance. Fortunately, our endurance and strength increase as we run the race and follow the course God has set out for us. Our success in the youth ministry race has a lot to do with developing a big-picture perspective. Check out the second verse:

*Because of you I will weep and wail; I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl. (Micah 1:8)*

Oh wait...that's not the right verse. Here it is:

*But I will not do this all in one year because the land would become a wilderness, and the wild animals would become too many to control. I will drive them out a little at a time until your population has increased enough to fill the land. (Exodus 23:29-30)*

The wild animal reference shouldn't be viewed as synonymous with the students in your group, but this verse accurately portrays a youth worker's world. The Exodus passage describes God's plan for the *gradual* conquest of Canaan. God didn't want to overwhelm Israel by giving them the Promised Land in one day. Besides, knowing Israel

wasn't completely prepared, God put together a journey that allowed them to develop their faith and confidence as they learned to depend on him.

This biblical principle applies to your youth ministry. God won't give you everything at once. The foundation of your ministry is strengthened as you develop faith, skills, leadership, experience, character, disciplines, and passion.

## **Where Do I Start?**

Whenever you pull out this book to read a chapter, I'd love for you to imagine that you and I are at your favorite informal restaurant, meeting again to talk about you and youth ministry. The goal of the meeting is for me to coach you during your first years as a youth worker. You're filled with questions, enthusiasm, ideas, hopes, fears, dreams, and prayers for your new ministry. I'm there because I heard you have a passion for God, a humble heart, a love for students, an eagerness to learn, and—hey, let's be honest—because you offered to pay. But who really cares about the food? This is a great setting for a heart-to-heart discussion about youth ministry!



The questions you're asking during our time together have been asked by most youth workers over the years. The number one question I'm asked after I teach a semi-



nar or after someone has finished reading my book, *Purpose-Driven® Youth Ministry*, is, “Where do I start?”

While many beginning youth workers would love for me to hand them a checklist of the exact steps to take, it's an impossible request. Since every church is unique, each youth worker complex, all students different, the steps you'll need to take won't be the same as the next youth worker's.

Even with the variety of youth workers who will read this book, some commitments are relevant to all youth workers regardless of denomination, church size, and country they live in. In this chapter, I've identified 10 commitments I'd like for you, as a new youth worker, to prayerfully consider making. They can serve as a foundation for your effectiveness, health, and happiness in youth ministry. Copy the summary on pages 21 and 22, post it in a visible place, and allow the commitments to influence you during your next several months in the trenches.

## **Doug's Top 10 Youth Ministry Commitments**

### **// 1. I will move slowly.**

Speed often leads to pain. When we first moved into our home, I teased my wife about her cautious parking habit. While it was a tight fit in our garage, it seemed to take her an absurd amount of time to pull into her space. One day when I was parking her car, I confidently and arrogantly zipped into the garage much faster than she did (I'm sure I shaved 10-15 seconds off of her time), but I also caused over \$250 in damage as I broke off the side mirror. My teasing halted immediately, and this experience led to a teaching principle...for my children, of course: what looks to be quick and easy may need to be approached slowly and carefully. The principle applies to youth ministry.

It's safe to assume you want to make some changes at your church during your first two years. Great! But these changes probably don't need to be implemented right away. With confidence, I can guarantee that even the changes that appear to be no-brainers cause pain for someone. If you're a volunteer, immediately suggesting changes may communicate a divisive or critical attitude to the lead youth worker. If you're the lead youth worker, fast changes can appear arrogant or reveal a maverick's personality to your church.

Instead of making immediate changes, keep a record of all potential changes as soon as you think of them. This allows you to give them prayerful consideration. Hang on to your list. Continue to be a critical thinker in the arena to which God has called you, but realize you don't have to apply all (or any) of the ideas that come to you. Slow down. If you're in this for the long haul, what's the rush? Hurried changes are often perceived as lacking thought. (I've committed an entire chapter to making the change process successful. See Chapter 11.)

When I arrived at Saddleback Church in 1992, I told my pastor that it would take at least five years for us to begin to see a healthy, balanced, volunteer-laden, vibrant ministry. This wasn't an arbitrary figure. I had come to Saddleback Church after spending 11 years in youth ministry at another church. I knew there's no such thing as a just-add-water approach.

Remember, God didn't move the Israelites into the Promised Land overnight, and he's not expecting you to change your church within your first two years. Relax. Prepare your own heart before you change your church. Remember, Jesus took 30 years to prepare for three years of ministry (and he had that God-thing going for him).

## // 2. I will regularly check my motives and evaluate my heart.

God honors pure motives, and the more you check yours, the stronger your leadership and decision-making will be. If your motives are pure, you'll persevere, reproduce student ministers, be productive, and contribute effectively, all while having fun. Most conflicts arise from unclear, mixed, or impure motives. If you don't personally evaluate your motives, others will—and if they're not pure, the impurity will be exposed.

I've learned that to check my motives, I must continually ask questions about myself:

- Why do I want to lead this ministry?
- Why do I want to teach this material?
- What's my motive for saying yes to that request?
- Why do I *really* want to change this program?
- When do I let people know I don't have a clue about what I'm doing?

You may think of other questions you need to ask yourself. It's good for you to evaluate your motives so you can lead with integrity.

In my early years, I wanted to cancel a student-run praise and worship night. Nothing was wrong with the program, and most people would have considered it a fairly successful night for students. I told people I wanted to cancel it because it wasn't growing and it was taking students out another night of the week (both good reasons). When I held the mirror up to examine my motives, I saw that my motives were to be noticed, to develop my credibility, and to highlight my speaking gifts (which weren't being seen because students were running the program). I used excuses as a smokescreen to cover my real agenda. My entire plan reeked of bad motives. Thankfully I didn't cancel the program, but I did see my ugly, dark side that was close to the surface and very real.

To keep your motives right, commit yourself to an honest and regular evaluation of your

heart, the source of your spiritual growth and leadership. (I have written an entire chapter about your heart's condition. See Chapter 3.)

I've made my own pledge to never do any training if I can't talk about the spiritual life of a leader. Unfortunately, I spent my first several years in youth ministry creating

## (A VOICE FROM THE TRENCHES)

I was 25, married with a child, and fresh out of seminary. My first, full-time youth ministry position was at a medium-size church in my hometown.

I thought seminary had prepared me pretty well for the things I would face. I mean, I spent several years in part-time youth ministry and felt ready to take on any challenge. I worked with the pastor as the only other paid, full-time staff member. One particular week, the pastor went out of town on vacation. I would get to do the radio program, preach, and perform all the duties that go with it. I was ecstatic.

Until the phone call.

A member of our church committed suicide. He was in his 40s, with a wife and eight-year-old son. I was asked to go to his house and minister there. I have to admit it was one of the few times in my life that I had no idea what to do—much less say.

On my way to the house, I prayed, asking God for guidance. Basically I just didn't want to make things worse. The scene was beyond explanation; I had never been exposed to anything resembling this. I prayed with his wife, quoted a variety of Scriptures—but somehow it seemed very inadequate. So then I just did what I could. I washed dishes, made food, played with their eight-year-old boy.

And I learned a very valuable lesson that day: A minister is a minister and needs to be prepared for any and all situations. I knew all the youth stuff, had all the youth experience, yet I couldn't minister outside of my element. I realized that day there's more to being a youth *minister* than just working with youth. I have gone on to take counseling courses and even worked with a counselor for a year to gain the experience necessary should I ever be presented with this kind of ministry opportunity again.

—Larry Darnell, *associate pastor youth and college, Adventure Baptist Church, Tallahassee, Florida*

fancy programs, inventing wild games, and growing the group to head-turning numbers, all on my own power. I was the antithesis of John 15 where Jesus tells us to be connected to the Father in order to bear fruit. I was connected to youth ministry books and magazines instead of God and his Word. Believe me, I'm a different man today and a much better youth worker because of my heart's connection. I don't have the energy that I did in 1979, but my church doesn't have the spiritually immature leader my previous church once had—I've learned to give myself regular heart check-ups since then.

### // 3. I will steer clear of the numbers game.

You don't need to be in youth ministry long before you hear this famous question: "How many kids are in your group?" I've heard it asked more times than I want to admit. Now I feel embarrassed for the person who asks this question. It feeds into the myth that bigger is better and that the value of your leadership is based on how many students you have. Here's my fleshly response to this carnal question: "Who cares?"

Please commit during your beginning years to not engage in the numbers game. Don't join the group of youth workers who erroneously base their value on how many students attend a particular event. This is not a basis for determining value.

Carol was a great volunteer youth worker who left our youth ministry team because she was "tired." Later when I asked for an exit interview, she admitted that the real reason was because she felt she was ineffective. She had only three girls in her small group while the other female leaders had at least twice as many. Even as a volunteer small group leader, she felt the pressure to grow.

Truthfully, Carol was a great small group leader, and if she had had more students in her group she wouldn't have had enough time to adequately care for them. She played the numbers game, and at the end of the game, our ministry lost, Carol lost, and those three girls lost. The numbers game is a losing game! Don't be fooled into becoming a loser!

Throwing out numbers can be exciting or debilitating depending on who you're talking to. Bigger isn't better; healthier is better. Steer clear of churches and youth workers who are driven by numbers, and surround yourself with those who are motivated by serving God faithfully and pursuing health.

## **What if My Supervisor Is *Really* into Numbers?**

First of all, I'd like to say, "I'm sorry." I understand the pressure of numbers, and I hate it. Thankfully some churches use numbers as tools—say, for planning and budgeting—but don't obsess over them. They're more concerned about pursuing health than attendance. But I realize that isn't the case in all churches, and you may feel the pressure of more... bigger... better. Not a fun culture to work in.

To write honestly, I need to say that chances are slim for changing a numbers-driven culture in a short period of time. While people and churches can change, it usually doesn't happen quickly. So what can you do? Here are some thoughts:

### ***1. Understand where the number pressure comes from.***

In many churches, the people making decisions are comfortable with a profit-loss mentality. Many church leaders come from the marketplace, and they want to know if they're getting "bang for their buck." That mentality leaks into the church and becomes, "Is the youth worker's salary justified by the number of students we have?" The answer to this isn't always objective, and that's where it becomes ugly. Attendance can be one form of evaluation, but shouldn't be the only form.

The numbers pressure has more history in secular thinking than in it does in biblical examples. But since the church is made up of people, and people are fallible, this type of thinking shouldn't surprise anyone. Regardless of whether you agree with it, it's good to know where these ideas come from.

### ***2. Understand your supervisor.***

Have a meeting with your supervisor to ask for her expectations. (Ideally this happens before you begin work. See Chapter 12.) Once you have the expectations, I suggest taking three steps:

1. Put the expectations in writing. Review them with your supervisor to make sure you understand them correctly.
2. If the expectations don't include numbers (and they probably won't), ask whether attendance numbers are related to the expectations, and, if so, what are the numbers expectations?
3. If there are numerical expectations, ask, "What happens if those numbers aren't met?"

### ***3. Learn to communicate in terms of health rather than numbers.***

Don't feed others' appetites for numbers by making number statements ("We had so many students there last night.") Instead choose statements that reflect health ("It's

exciting to see how students are responding to the Bible study by bringing their friends.”) Here are some other actions to take:

- Tell life-change stories. Share the good work God is doing in people’s lives.
- Use words like health instead of growth.
- Communicate forward thinking by using terms like reach, build, increase, vision, and change.
- Train the other youth ministry leaders to be more concerned with health than numbers. The more people pursuing health, the better.

Please don’t give in to the temptation to inflate numbers so you can stay in favor with your supervisor. You will compromise your integrity if you do. If your ministry is in God’s hands, if you’re seeking his direction, if you’re giving your best effort, that’s all you can do. You’ve got to focus on doing the possible in the best way you know how and trust God for what’s beyond your control.

If that isn’t good enough for your supervisor, it may be time to ask God to move you in a new direction. Don’t be discouraged. Many healthy churches exist and your next ministry opportunity may be at one.

#### // 4. I will not criticize the past.

It’s tempting to talk about the past with contempt to make yourself look better in the present or as an excuse to justify a change. Don’t do it! Honor those who went before you in the ministry. Some students will wish you were like their last youth worker. But God didn’t make you like that last person. In time the students will move forward.

You may think criticism of the past bolsters your credibility. But if you’re working with genuine people—students or adults—they’ll see right through you. Only people of weak character are won over by negativity. Your hopes for credibility will only be seen as immaturity in the eyes of authentic people.

Don’t give in to the temptation to make your predecessor look bad by highlighting problems you have because of her mistakes. Keep quiet, take notes of what people value about the past, and learn from those who have been at your church longer than you. In doing so, you’ll outlast your critics, enhance your character, and model integrity to your students.

Criticizing is easy, but character finds goodness and brings attention to it. Commit to strengthen your character by making others look good.

I think it was Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach and great theologian of the Green Bay Packers, who used to say, "When you have strayed away from the basics, you have gone a long way toward defeat."

Doug does a great job of reminding youth ministry novices and veterans alike to keep the main thing the main thing. The basics of good youth ministry are indeed like the marathon Doug wants to run one day—because life is like a marathon. What I hear Doug saying (and doing) is that so much of our success in youth ministry is in the preparation, focus, perseverance, and commitment to the common sense basics of ministry.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:24ff), Jesus reminds us that wind, rain, and storms will definitely come to all of our lives and ministries. Those who build their houses on the rock will last, and those who build their houses on the sand will crash. It's a very simple illustration; yet it's a great reminder for us to construct a firm foundation in our youth ministries in order to see life-changing results in the kids and families to whom we minister.

Doug and I were sitting together at a youth ministry conference a few years ago, and he turned to me and asked, "Whatever happened to...?" referring to a youth worker who'd ministered to him when he was a student. I sadly answered, "He crashed and burned." Then he asked, "How about...?" I replied, "Gone." Unfortunately, many of the people we talked about that day had burned out, crashed morally, or faded into the past. They had been incredible leaders, too, influencing kids and families in wonderful ways—but they didn't build their lives on the Rock.

They would have benefitted from paying attention to this first chapter, because untended fires soon become raging infernos, then nothing but a pile of ashes.

I was Doug Fields' youth pastor from his last year of junior high until his senior year of high school. (Sorry I didn't make it to your graduation, Doug.) As a freshman in college through his seminary years, he was my intern. *And you think you had problems with your staff!?! Seriously, during those years, one of the common themes we kept hearing was, "God will often use you in the greatest ways when you are over 40 years old—if you stay faithful to your calling."*

Back then, turning 40 sounded like a very, very long way off—for me! So you can understand why I couldn't even imagine Doug breaking the 30-year-old barrier! But today, because Doug did stay faithful to his calling, you have in your hands this book—and it's filled with nuggets of truth that, when applied, will help you reach young people, strengthen families, and change lives forever.

—Jim Burns

## // 5. I will avoid the comparison trap.

This commitment has a similar result to the numbers game since it can't lead you anywhere good. When you compare you lose. Either you're filled with pride because you're better than another person, or you're dejected because you don't measure up. Both attitudes are wrong and destructive. Comparison places what you know about yourself (or your ministry) against what you don't know about another youth worker (or her ministry). That's not a fair evaluation.

You'll be tempted to compare yourself to others several times during your first two years; you'll wonder if you're going to make it because you're not like someone else. To this day, when I compare myself to another person, I find myself second-guessing my gifts and ministry opportunities. What a depressing position to be in. My prayer is that

you steer clear of this temptation early and continually.

We have a wonderful volunteer in our ministry named Li who played the comparison game before she even joined our volunteer team. She was the mom of a student and opened her home

A trap is so easy to fall into—and so tough to get out of. In youth ministry, we live in a world that’s constantly measuring us: *Talented enough? Big enough group? Energetic enough?* I wish youth ministry protected us from the comparison trap, but it’s set everywhere—even in church. And I often find myself stepping right into it—and I hate it. Fortunately, I have friends like Doug who love me enough to remind me that God’s love for me isn’t based on what others are comparing me to (or what I’m comparing myself to)—and that’s very freeing.  
—Kurt Johnston

every Wednesday night to host several small groups in several rooms of her home. When we needed an additional small group leader, I approached Li to prayerfully consider the role. She told me that she didn’t feel young enough when she compared herself to leaders in their 20s and 30s. She was afraid that none of the students would want to leave the younger leaders to be in a small group with a mom pushing 50.

She committed to pray about the opportunity. Some of the teenagers approached her and said, “We’d like to be in a small group with an older woman who has parented teenagers. We need some wisdom to better understand our parents.”

Li was amazed and eagerly jumped at the chance to influence these girls. She later told me, “I can’t believe I almost missed this incredible ministry opportunity because I was comparing myself to 20-year-olds. I learned a great lesson.”

I can tell you from firsthand experience that nothing is ever as good as it looks from a distance. From outer space, the Earth looks like a peaceful, stress-free place, but up close it’s chaotic and dangerous. When you feel tempted to compare yourself to another volunteer, leader, or Bible teacher, stop and focus on God’s love for you in that moment. God’s love isn’t based on how you measure up. He loves you for who you are, not for whom you think you should be more like. Your value as a youth worker must come from God’s *unconditional* love for you, or you’ll find yourself pursuing the approval of others and trying too hard to earn something from people that God gives freely.

I don’t break this commitment nearly as much as the youth worker down the street!

## // 6. I will focus on priorities.

The many demands of youth ministry will keep you busy. But when you’re spread too thin, you’ll eventually snap. You’ve got to make a commitment to manage your limited



time to go the distance. To do this, you need a healthy understanding of your priorities based on the church's values and expectations. (We'll process this idea from start to finish in Chapter 12).



To help with your priorities you must learn quickly how and when to say no. Without a sense of priorities, you'll say yes to things that deserve a no, and you'll have lost time for those important areas that require your yes. (See page 32 for ideas on time management.)

One reality you'll quickly learn is that youth ministry never ends. More is always waiting to be done, and you'll find yourself wanting to do more. The most difficult decisions you may face are the ones that require saying no to being at more events, meeting with more people, doing more.

Doing more isn't necessarily good youth ministry. Doing the right things, based on your priorities, is good youth ministry regardless of how much time you have available to spend. I'd rather have one youth worker who knows his priorities and does the right thing for 30 minutes a week than have two youth workers who have hours to spend and are aimless with their time. The most effective youth workers are the ones who know how to focus on what's expected of them. People who are spread too thin might be busy, but busyness is not synonymous with effectiveness.

No. No. No. Keep practicing that word!

## Develop Time Management Skills

Do whatever it takes to learn time management skills now. Your effectiveness in this area contributes to your success, or your failure in this area will plague you for years.

Here are four realities that confront every youth worker I've ever met:

- You'll be busy!
- You have only 86,400 seconds to live each day.
- You'll struggle in youth ministry if you can't manage your time.
- Plan your time or people will plan it for you.

You can't add more hours, so you need to control the hours you're given. If you're the lead youth worker and you work in a part-time or full-time setting, consider looking at each day as having three blocks of time (21 blocks a week). For example, you might block out your time like this:

9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

1 p.m. - 5 p.m.

5 p.m. - 9 p.m.

How you manage these blocks of time directly influences your success as a youth worker. When are you at your best spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically? When are you least productive? Complete your most important tasks during your most productive hours.

I'm most alert and productive during the morning block, so I reserve the 9 to 1 p.m. hours for my most crucial thinking and preparation. I use my afternoon hours for people and meetings, since the interactions force me to be alert when I'm more tired.

As you consider your week's 21 blocks of time, make sure you reserve time for yourself, your family, and other important domains of your life outside of ministry. And if you're a full-time youth worker, very rarely should you work during all three blocks, every day. If, for instance, you work blocks 2 and 3 on Wednesday, take block 1 for yourself on Thursday. When you get into the habit of looking at your time in blocks, a week at a time, you can evaluate how you best use your time and plan more efficiently.

Many good books and seminars are available on time management. Ask business-minded people in your church for their current favorites.

### // 7. I will pace myself.

Hopefully, you're in youth ministry for a marathon, not a sprint. Right away, you must learn how to stay in shape. Since youth ministry is never finished, and more can always be done, learn to take daily stretches—breathers throughout your day and week so you

can be refreshed. Discover places, moments, and people who provide refreshment from the busyness of youth ministry and take your mind away from all that needs to be done.

Because I'm in youth ministry full time, I try to take a daily stretch to clear my mind from youth ministry. It doesn't need to be long, but it does need to be refreshing. My escapes happen when I—

- Coach my kids' sports teams
- Drink diet Pepsi and read the newspaper at Taco Bell
- Play racquetball
- Jog with a friend
- Lift weights
- Relax in the jacuzzi with my wife (or in the church baptismal...kidding!)

These activities slow me down. When I'm out of control and think I need more time in my day, I feel outside of God's will. I know God doesn't plan more for me to do than he's given me time for. The same truth applies to you. Draw up a list of your own ways to get refreshed. (I highly recommend caffeine!)

## // 8. I will serve.

This commitment may not impress you as good youth ministry advice, but it's crucial to your long-term effectiveness as a leader. The longer you're in youth ministry, the more likely you'll be in positions where you lead and others follow. That's fine, good, wonderful, and even appealing. But Jesus gave the church a unique model of leadership that requires serving. If you want to be a great youth worker, serve. If you want to be first, be last. If you can't serve, you can't lead, at least not as Christ intended. You're an incredible example of Christ to church leaders, members, and students when you serve. Actually, you're never more like Jesus than when you serve.

This is the part of youth ministry where you'll get God's blessing because you won't get human recognition. This is when you make the extra effort to pick up trash in the Sunday school room, help someone in the church office, carry boxes to the secretary's car, refrain from teasing your pastor about his toupee, give up an hour to help fold church bulletins, and offer transportation to an elderly saint.

These are the tasks that probably aren't included in your job description but should be written on your heart. Jump at the opportunity to serve in the little ways and your youth ministry will benefit because of your character. You can't lose when you serve.

### **// 9. I will be a learner.**

I live by an axiom that's popular in my church: "All leaders are learners. When a leader stops learning, the leader stops leading." Although this attitude requires a constant investment of time and sacrifice, not to mention a diet of humility, it has enhanced my leadership skills as a youth worker. I can only teach what I know, and this truth requires me to keep growing. This habit is especially important to maintaining a decent self-esteem, since many of the teenagers in my church think I don't know anything.

I'm saddened each year at youth ministry conventions when I notice that veteran youth workers choose not to attend the workshop sessions because the material isn't delivered by big-name, general-session speakers. In my experience some of the bright, young, unknown leaders have some of the freshest approaches and newest ideas—ones that offer strong learning opportunities to those of us who're getting wrinkles and losing hair!

Make a commitment today to be an eager, life-long learner. Read. Listen to tapes. Discuss ideas with people you disagree with. Sit at the feet of teachers who are younger and older than you. You'll learn from your mistakes, but a wise leader is proactive and learns from others, too. The fact that you're reading this book shows you value this principle.

### **// 10. I will pursue contentment.**

One of the common themes I hear from new youth workers has to do with discontentment. Typically, they want to see more fruit from their labor and see it faster. They want bigger results and instant rewards and feel abandoned when these don't materialize.

I've learned that when I feel discontent with my ministry situation, every option outside my church seems better. The church down the street looks inviting, that speaking invitation sounds alluring, the opportunity that I said no to last month now appears worthwhile. Each is a symptom of discontentment.

Ministry isn't easy. Your first two years may be the most difficult years you'll ever experience, and our enemy would love to see you ineffective and living in the land of discontentment. One of the most frequent results of discontentment is leaving, walking away from your ministry. When you leave your youth ministry too soon after arriving, you hurt the church. Students stop opening up when adults rotate through their lives. The next leader has to deal with the backlash.



Anika's my neighbor, a 12th grader who's had five different small group leaders at her church. Anika told me she doesn't feel like talking to her small group leaders anymore. She has no confidence they'll stick around. I've tried inviting her to attend one of our small groups, but she has no assurance ours will be any different.

Short-term commitments may be beneficial for the adult, but they damage the student.

If you want to survive, pursue being content with where God has you and the gifts you've been given. Stop looking over your fence into your neighbor's yard, and thank God he's using you where he has you. You've heard the adage, "The grass is greener on the other side"? The truth is, the grass is greener where it's watered. So start watering your own grass.

When you change ministries, you often simply exchange one set of problems for another.

Discontentment and discouragement are blood relatives. When you have one uninvited guest, you almost always have the other. Since they show up so frequently, I've devoted the entire next chapter to dealing with the problem. And if you and your church are still on a honeymoon, you can come back to the topic later.

## **The Payoff**

These commitments, and others you may think of, form the foundation from which healthy youth ministry can be developed. When we, as youth workers, stack hands over them, we honor our Lord, our church, and our students. Please prayerfully consider committing to these actions and letting them influence you as you work with students, parents, church staff, and volunteers.

I'm happy you've chosen to read this book. I have hope for you and the thousands of men and women who love God and students and who are willing to learn more about youth ministry. Thank you for being open to coaching from a veteran youth worker who's still running the marathon and cheering you on as you enter the race. Because I'm a little further along, I want you to know that, from where I am, the view is better, the terrain is lighter, and the company is incredible. Live by the 10 commitments in this chapter, keep running, and you'll experience the same.

### 1. I will move slowly.

*A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps. A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless. (Proverbs 14:15-16)*

### 2. I will regularly check my motives and evaluate my heart.

*Leaders who know their business and care keep a sharp eye out for the shoddy and cheap, for who among us can be trusted to be always diligent and honest? Switching price tags and padding the expense account are two things God hates. Young people eventually reveal by their actions if their motives are on the up and up. Ears that hear and eyes that see—we get our basic equipment from God! (Proverbs 20:8-12, The Message)*

### 3. I will steer clear of the numbers' game.

*If a shepherd has one hundred sheep, and one wanders away and is lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others and go out into the hills to search for the lost one? (Matthew 18:12, NLT)*

### 4. I will not criticize the past.

*No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead. (Philippians 3:13, NLT)*

### 5. I will avoid the comparison trap.

*Be sure to do what you should, for then you will enjoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. (Galatians 6:4, NLT)*

### 6. I will focus on priorities.

*"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" Jesus replied, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:36-40, NLT)*

### 7. I will pace myself.

*Patient endurance is what you need now, so you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised. (Hebrews 10:36, NLT)*

## 8. I will serve.

*But among you it is quite different. Anyone wanting to be a leader among you must be your servant. And if you want to be right at the top, you must serve like a slave. Your attitude must be like my own, for I, the Messiah, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.*

(Matthew 20:26-28, LB)

## 9. I will be a learner.

*Learn to be wise, and develop good judgment. Don't forget or turn away from my words. He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.* (Proverbs 4:5; 13:20, NLT)

## 10. I will pursue contentment.

*I am not telling you this because I need anything. I have learned to be satisfied with the things I have and with everything that happens.* (Philippians 4:11, NCV)



## The Questions at the End of the Chapter

### // For group discussion

- Which commitment is going to be the toughest for you?
- Which commitment offers you the most encouragement?

### // For personal reflection

- Do I have a sprint mentality or a marathon mindset when it comes to youth ministry?
- How will it affect the church and/or the student ministry if I quit too soon?
- What is my personal plan to evaluate my motives?
- How can I begin an honest conversation with my supervisor about the “numbers game”?
- What can I do to improve the commitment that I struggle with the most?

### // Actions to consider

- Photocopy pages 21 and 22 and keep them in a place where you’ll see them every day for the next month.
- Identify one person on your ministry team who personalizes the commitment that you struggle with most and write that person an encouraging letter noting that he or she is a model to you.
- If your ministry team isn’t reading this book as a group, find one person on your team to read through it with you and discuss each chapter.

Go to [www.dougfields.com](http://www.dougfields.com) and enter your comments under Your First 2 Years: Chapter 1