

# ASKING THE UNASKED QUESTIONS

*Examining how local churches and youth leaders can create environments for retaining youth leaders and facilitating enduring and mission-shaped youth ministries.*

**Q: How many youth workers does it take to change a light bulb?**

**A: No one knows - the youth worker always burns out before the light bulb.**

This resource intends to address an almost accepted trend amongst churches regarding *the high incidence of youth leaders leaving youth ministry*. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many youth leaders leave their youth ministry before three years, and some much earlier than that. While some will go on to another church ministry, others will leave youth ministry altogether. This is a loss that we as Movement cannot afford. On a personal level, it often has an enduring impact on the youth leader and their family. We must realise that a high turnover of those in youth ministry (for whatever reasons) will severely limit our ability to reach a new generation with the Gospel.

This situation is aptly described in the *Youth Ministry Missional Action Team* report submitted to the Vic/Tas Conference in 2006:

*...many a once enthusiastic youth leader has decided that perhaps they misread the call, got the timing wrong, chose the wrong position in the wrong church or should have gone for their trip around the world to get some life experience first. As they slip into the shadows with their confidence knocked and questions about the God they thought they were following few people notice...so we chalk up another youth leader who lasts less than 3 years in the role.*

*It's almost so typical that it seems normal, so there aren't too many questions asked. Most likely no one will ask them why they really left or support them in piecing together the fragments of their faith.*

*(MAT report, pg 5)*

The following contains the questions that do address some of the reasons youth leaders 'slip into the shadows'. While this resource is not designed to have definitive answers, it is a conversation starter on how to holistically care for youth leaders. We do not see that youth leaders are *solely* responsible for their own health, nor are their churches. It is in crucial partnership between the two that vast improvements to the health and longevity of youth ministries in our churches can be made, subsequently presenting more opportunities to create vital, missional connections to the communities around us.

The key areas of our focus are:

## 1. Healthy Relationships with the Triune God

*For spiritual formation to be encouraged, nurtured and facilitated, there needs to be a broad understanding that (like all disciples) the youth leader*

*will have times when they walk on the heights with God and other times when God seems distant and prayers return empty-handed.*

## **2. Healthy Self-Care**

*Every aspect of us is to be surrendered to the Triune God in worship. He is interested in the "ordinary" aspects of our lives: our sleep, our bodies, our moods, our health. He knows that it does not matter how 'spiritual' we appear in our public ministry; if our lifestyle is causing ill health or keeping us up all night, we will not be maximising the potential for fruit within us.*

## **3. Healthy Relationships with local church leadership**

*A 'siloed' youth leader (or ministry) will be less likely to be healthy. Indeed, those who stay in youth ministry do so partly because they are encouraged to play a role in the church beyond the 'traditional scope' of youth ministry, and are resourced to do that.*

## **4. Healthy Relationships with volunteers and parents**

*There can also be a sense that the 'full burden' of ministry being felt by a youth leader is perceived rather than actual. A youth leader whose self-care is slipping or whose relationship with the Triune God may be losing vitality is prone to thinking 'it all depends on me'.*

## **5. Healthy Relationships with spouse and family**

*Many times so called 'ministry demands' that impose themselves on 'family time' can reasonably be put off for a few hours (or longer) so that spouses and children can get the attention they need. Remember, many can minister in churches - but no one can minister to your family like you can.*

Again, we need to state that these areas cannot be tackled by the youth leader alone, or indeed by the leadership of a local church alone. For example, whilst the primary person *responsible* for the youth leader's relationship with the Triune God is the youth leader, we would suggest that the local church leadership has a *responsibility* to do what they can to ensure that the youth leader's relationship with the Triune God is healthy and growing.

## Healthy Relationships with the Triune God

Connection to the Triune God is the key component in what could be termed a 'healthy youth ministry'. Jesus reminds His disciples that the vital connection needed to produce fruit is with Him: *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5)*. Simply stated, ongoing and vital relationship with the Triune God will lead to fruit. Of course, just as different trees produce different fruit, so too will different youth ministries and churches produce different varieties of fruit. But fruit that will *last (John 15:16)* can only come from that vital connection with the Triune God.

Despite the fact that a youth leader is often considered a part of the ministry team they, like all leaders, are still undergoing a process of spiritual formation. For spiritual formation to be encouraged, nurtured and facilitated, there needs to be a broad understanding that (like all disciples) the youth leader will have times when they walk on the heights with God and other times when God seems distant and prayers return empty-handed. Authentic spiritual formation under the glare of paid ministry can be difficult. Experienced team leaders know this, and have often formulated strategies to cope. Consider, however, a first term youth leader: challenged by theological study, experiencing a new church and ministry, and amongst this attempting to keep their spiritual formation fresh and alive. Perhaps they are newly married, or have a young family, or have just moved house, all of which can be further challenges to their spiritual formation. It is such times as this that partnership is crucial to them.

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### What are the key questions to ask? Who should be asking them?

The following are just some starter questions, and are obviously designed more for a youth leader beginning a ministry at a new church, but can be easily adapted to suit any youth ministry. As to who should be asking these questions, it probably needs to be the ministry team leader. Ultimately in most Churches of Christ, the Eldership serves as the employer. Whilst many Elders would be quite capable of mentoring and guiding a youth leader, issues may arise that cause a possible conflict of interest: just how much does a stressed youth leader disclose about his spiritual formation to an Elder who will be one day reviewing his ministry? If they suggest that their relationship with Christ is struggling, will someone on the Eldership view that as a black mark against their ability to lead youth into a deeper relationship with Christ? From an individual Elder's point of view, they may suddenly be considered the 'expert' on the youth leader, which puts undue pressure on that Elder when employment issues arise (be that the termination or the extension of a contract).

The team leader at the church (or in larger churches, another experienced leader) is

the person best equipped to be the primary partner in the continuing spiritual formation of the youth leader. Full - and mutual - disclosure is more likely to happen in that environment. The following questions can be helpful.

**Key Questions:**

- Do you have a mentor outside of the church? *(if they are new to the area, does the team leader have a list of names they could prayerfully consider?)*
- Can you articulate the sense of call you have to ministering to youth? *This is a crucial area to explore as it will help a youth leader stay in ministry and persevere through the tough times that come.*
- What spiritual disciplines did you have in place before you started this ministry? Are they still in place and vital?
- Has ministry here squeezed out the space you need for daily interaction with the Triune God?
- What new aspects of the Triune God has ministry exposed you to?
- Do you have time to listen to the voice of God, to let the Scriptures read you, to discern the move of the Spirit?
- What spiritual discipline can we embark upon together/as a team? *(i.e., fasting, reading through a particular Gospel, exploring what it means to discern God's voice, etc)*

## Healthy Self-Care

The Triune God is interested in every aspect of us. He is not a God just of Sundays, or of our ministries. He is not just a resource to be accessed in order that our churches run well. His desire is for all of us, all of the time. This is Jesus' point in Mark 12:29-30 ...*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength* (See also Deuteronomy 6:4-6). Every aspect of us is to be surrendered to the Triune God in worship. He is interested in the "ordinary" aspects of our lives: our sleep, our bodies, our moods, our health. He knows that it does not matter how 'spiritual' we appear in our public ministry; if our lifestyle is causing ill health or keeping us up all night, we will not be maximising the potential for fruit within us.

The previous category focused on the team nature of spiritual formation and youth leader health. Ultimately, however, to be healthy and holistic, we need to develop good self-care strategies that will help us endure in ministry. The previous questions provided a framework of accountability and partnership. The following questions look at the patterns that are built in to the youth leader's lifestyle. It is commendable to develop an ambitious plan of prayer for example, but when a combination of late nights, over-reliance on caffeine and a poor diet leave a youth leader feeling chronically run down, plans go out the window. Self-care questions can also be used as part of any team ministry environment, but they also work well as prompts for individual youth leaders.

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A key issue when it comes to self-care is part-time youth ministry versus full-time youth ministry. Part-time is popular in many churches and whilst it puts less pressure on church budgets and balance sheets, it can be argued that it puts more pressure on youth leaders (and their families). If a youth leader is working two jobs, then it is inevitable that clashes between 'ministry' and 'work' (or study) will occur. Depending on the church and the expectations of the church, 'part-time' ministry can be a very fuzzy term, and in reality often means more hours than those stated (particularly if you count preparation time and travel). Some experienced youth leaders would suggest that sustained part time youth ministry can erode the sense of vocational call on a youth leader, or may start them on the process of looking for a more 'viable' (i.e., closer to full-time) youth ministry.

### **Key Questions**

- How much are you exercising?
- How much sleep are you getting?
- Is your diet balanced?

- Are your days off truly days off? (*i.e., you're not coming into the office, answering e-mails or making phone calls*)
- What activity/hobby do you pursue outside of ministry? (*i.e., what do you enjoy doing aside from ministry? When do you find time for that?*)
- How are your finances?
- Do you have a good grasp of what your role requires of you?
- How are your key relationships going?
- Do you think you have a healthy work/life balance?

## Healthy Relationship With the Local Church Leadership

One of the key biblical metaphors is that ministry is done as part of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus gave opportunities for his disciples to exercise ministry in partnership with his mission (Luke 10), and Paul saw himself as part of a team (Romans 16:3; Philippians 1:3-6) working with a vast range of different personalities, giftings and expressions of mission. Whilst youth ministry is a specialised ministry, it should not be one that stands apart from the local church or other ministries. A healthy youth ministry is one that is connected to the rest of the Body, which includes other members of the ministry team, the Eldership, volunteer leaders and parents (see below), just to name a few. A 'siloes' youth leader (or ministry) will be less likely to be healthy. Indeed, those who stay in youth ministry do so partly because they are encouraged to play a role in the church beyond the 'traditional scope' of youth ministry, and are resourced to do that.

Despite the best efforts at partnership, conflict occurs in the local church context. Conflict between aspects of the church community and youth leaders can often be traced back to two main areas: **communication** and **perception**. Church communities often have unspoken (but strong) perceptions about how 'niche' ministries (such as youth, children's, worship, etc) should function, and this can be a potential point of confusion between aspects of the church community and those involved in youth ministry.

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### **Key Questions**

Communication regarding (and perception about) youth ministry can be actively improved by other members of the ministry team and Eldership. Some issues to raise are:

- How well educated is the local congregation regarding youth ministry? Do they view youth ministry solely in terms of ministering to youth in a youth group? Do they view a 'successful' youth ministry as one that delivers more youth into the church service?
  - The reality, of course, is that *the majority of youth are not in the youth group, and those in contact with the youth not at the youth group are not the youth leader* (MAT report, pg 5). Youth ministry has shifted over the past decade in extraordinary ways. Many youth leaders are now being trained to have a missional approach to youth ministry, but may well have accepted roles in churches where youth ministry has been seen as 'leading a youth group'. Unless addressed, these two different approaches to ministry will cause conflict.
  - This possible re-education of the local church (or parts of it) cannot be left to the youth leader. It requires a culture shift and is therefore the responsibility of the team leader and Elders to cultivate a church environment which will help sustain a missional youth ministry. Such an

environment will be more likely to nurture a long term youth leader.

- How does the church, the church leadership and the youth leader define a 'healthy youth ministry'? Is it attendance, baptisms, moving towards Christ or a combination of factors? Whatever they are, this must be communicated to both the youth leader and the church as a whole.
- How does internal evaluation of the youth leader and ministry take place?
  - A healthy evaluation is one that is consistent in its format, allows for two-way feed back, has plenty of notice and is conducted with a desire to benefit both the youth leader and the church as a whole. Some common mistakes include:
    - A review whose criticisms emerge for the first time on paper. This is a breakdown in communication. If something is enough of a concern to be included in an annual review, it is enough of a concern to prompt a conversation with the youth leader prior to an annual review.
    - A review that does not offer help in areas of perceived weakness.
    - A review that does not delve into areas of perceived weaknesses at all.
    - A review that simply scales on a '1 to 10' basis without adequate explanations.
    - A review that is not open to the possibility of change and transformation.
  - Healthy responses to reviews include:
    - A strategy to improve weaknesses.
    - Responses that are not immediate. Even when stung by a review (either legitimately or not) it is best to not respond out of a sense of anger. Arrange a time to meet with the review panel and approach it prayerfully.
    - A realisation that reviews are not definitive for your future.
    - A comprehensive self-review every 6 months. What are my strengths? My weaknesses? Where have I grown? What have I let slip?
- Sometimes, what needs a hard review is the youth leader's position description (PD) - is it clear? Has it evolved with the changing shape of youth ministry? If it is over three years old, it probably needs a comprehensive review.
  - How do you understand your position description? Do you know what you have to do to clearly fulfill it? Is this the understanding of the Eldership?
  - Does the PD conform to State Conference recommendations?

- Do you have a copy of (and have read) your State Conference policies on ministry, ethics and privacy laws, and the like?
- Do you understand your contract? What you are entitled to and what is required of you? Have you run this and your PD past select others outside the church to make sure that nothing is missing? As your ministry has progressed, do your contractual arrangements need some tweaking? (i.e., are you spending a small fortune on SMS's and coffee?)
- As a team leader, can you offer the youth leader help with understanding their contract? Can you ensure that they are treated in ways that take into account the differing nature of youth ministry?

## Healthy Relationships With Parents and Volunteers

It is crucial for any youth ministry that it not be totally reliant on the youth leader. Obviously, they have an important role to play and often spearhead the ministry. However, burnout can occur when the youth leader either:

- (a) takes the full burden of the ministry on themselves *without* utilising the resources around them; or
- (b) takes on the full burden of the ministry as there are *no* resources to support them.

There can also be a sense that the full burden' of ministry being felt by a youth leader is perceived rather than actual. A youth leader whose self-care is slipping or whose relationship with the Triune God may be losing vitality is prone to thinking 'it all depends on me' (Proverbs 3:5-6; also Philippians 4:13). A youth leader who feels unsupported can also engage in this worldview. This is a dangerous and isolating worldview, where burnout, moral failure and the temptation to leave youth ministry (to name a few outcomes) can occur. It also does not model a partnership in the Gospel as portrayed in the New Testament (see above).

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### **Key Questions**

- How do you portray what a healthy youth ministry looks like to your youth leadership team? *(Both from the youth leader and team leader perspective)*
  - Are you able to empower other youth leaders?
  - Do you put time into their development as opposed to just making sure they get the job done? When you are with your leaders, what percentage of the time is spent on program refinement as opposed to imagining a new future?
  - Can you be vulnerable with your team? When you are hurting, do they know? Or are you 'always in control'? Always upbeat?
  - Do you pool together your combined knowledge of youth culture to spark ideas for youth ministry? Or are you the guru of all things 'youth'?
  - Does your team feel that they can honestly share how they are feeling about the youth ministry?
  - How long do volunteers generally stay in youth ministry in your church? When they leave, do they 'leave well'? Do you know the reasons why they leave?

- Do you actively recruit for new team members?
  - Can you articulate your vision for the youth ministry of your church in such a way that a person will want to give up their time to serve God in this area?
  - Are you aware of what is lacking in your teams' giftings, and how to develop that from within the team or recruit people in?
- How often do you communicate with parents in the local church about the youth ministry?
  - Do they have access to youth group programs (if you run a youth group)?
  - Do they know who the team of youth leaders are?
  - Are they aware of the vision you have for the youth ministry?
  - Have you shared with them valuable resources that are shaping your ministry?
  - Do they know what areas to volunteer for if they have the time?
  - How do you communicate with parents of church youth and those not connected to the church so they know what their children are experiencing?

## Healthy Relationships with Friends, Spouse and Family

In some generations it has been a pastoral model that the minister 'sacrifices' family time (and in extreme cases, *family*) to ministry. It is true that in all things God must come first, and there will be times when family plans will be interrupted with the demands - and opportunities - of ministry. However, the Gospel does not call youth leaders to treat their spouses and children as second class citizens in comparison to ministry. Jesus makes this clear: *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate (Mark 10:7-9).*

Many times so called 'ministry demands' that impose themselves on 'family time' can reasonably be put off for a few hours (or longer) so that spouses and children can get the attention they need. Remember, many can minister in churches - but *no one* can minister to your family like *you* can.

### **Key Questions**

- Do you regularly make time to spend deliberate and quality time with your spouse?
- How often do you rearrange family time to deal with a 'ministry emergency'? (*Don't just attempt to answer this question on your own...ask your spouse and family*)
- How 'off limits' are your days off?
- Are there times when you turn your mobile phone off?
- Are there people in your congregation who you feel overstep boundaries?
- Does your spouse feel part of your ministry? Or does your spouse feel used by your ministry?
- Is there pressure on your spouse to be heavily involved in your ministry, just because they are married to you?
- Just because you are married, do you see that as a 'safety net' that allows you to spend significant amounts of time alone with members of the opposite sex?

For single youth leaders, it is imperative to cultivate a group of accountable friends *outside* the orbit of the local church in which you are ministering. This does not mean you do not have friends within

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your local church, but it does mean you have a group of friends who see you primarily as a *friend* without the trappings of you being the *youth leader* in their church. Obviously, you need to use discretion when ministering to members of the opposite sex (as would a married youth leader). You also need to be in touch with your feelings regarding a life partner. It is also crucial to note that single youth leaders still have family responsibilities - to parents, siblings, nephews and nieces. The single youth leader must still be allowed to input time into these crucial relationships.

### **Key Questions**

- What appropriate boundaries do you need to set in your church around these issues?
- If you were attracted to a member of the church, would it be appropriate to communicate this? In what way?
- Who are you accountable to in this regard? Who in church leadership can you talk to if you needed to?
- Do you have a group of friends who see you as a friend, not a youth leader?
- Are your days off free - or are you seen as being 'always available' because you are single? Do you see yourself that way? Are your boundaries - which allow you the space to recharge - being respected?
- How are you looking after yourself? Are you eating balanced meals?

*This resource, ideally, is only a beginning point. Church leadership and youth leaders should be able to craft their own set of questions based on their unique circumstances. Historical and environmental factors may need to be approached that have not been delved into in this document. Regardless, if this document can help churches look at ways of optimising the conditions their youth leaders work in, and help youth leaders stay long term in ministry, then it could be considered a success.*

**For more information contact your conference's Youth Vision leaders through your Church of Christ state office.**

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from around Australia in 2009*