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# Joining God's Work

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# Joining God's Work

Dear Youthworker,

First, I think congratulations are in order.

You've either just gotten this job or somehow survived in it for these last several months and years. Both deserve a hearty "congrats," and, if we were face to face, a beer (or if your tradition or principles doesn't allow, then at least a creamy hot chocolate).

But, unfortunately, I'm not writing only to say "congrats" and whet your appetite for Hefeweizen, I'm also writing with a little bit of advice. Now, my advice comes in one statement, a statement that could very easily be misunderstood, so please keep reading.

Ready...really...you ready?

My advice is this:

**Don't be concerned with loving the young people in your ministry.**

Yep, you read that right. Go ahead read it again...Or I'll just repeat myself: **Don't be concerned with loving the young people in your ministry.** I know, I know. I've just spoken Youth Ministry 101 heresy. I mean, you got into this business of doing youth ministry because you love kids. And I'm sure every youth ministry guru you've heard has inspired you by telling you that youth ministry is really and finally about loving kids.

But I think we have a problem in youth ministry. We tend to be more interested in *us* loving kids than in participating in God's action.

God is at work bringing life out of death, (which is what love is, by the way). You're called by the Spirit of Christ—you are called as minister of the gospel—not to love kids, but to participate in God's divine action, God's divine love already active in the world and their lives. You are called to thrust yourself and those that you're called to serve into this action, helping them have eyes to see God's action.

Karl Barth once told preachers that they had better not love their congregations more than they love the Word of God. It is God's Word and Work, not our love (even with all its effort), that is transformative.

23 I want to encourage you to redefine the very purpose of youth ministry, as participating in the action of God, as doing something theological in your ministry. I want for you to see your ministry as being about discerning divine action and joining in it. The God of Christianity moves from death to life. Are you brave enough to stand in those places of death and seek life, in those places of despair, proclaiming and yearning for hope? This is what it means to seek and join God's action.

You need to be clear on the purpose of youth ministry; you need to be able to finish this sentence: *Youth ministry is for...*

If you can't finish this statement with something substantive, others will finish it for you. And the way they answer it will set the course or provide the resistance for your ministry. The way American congregations historically have finished this sentence is a problem; it may be a good-intentioned, heart-in-the-right-place problem, but it is a problem.

Many conservative/evangelical American congregations have believed (often tacitly) that youth ministry is for keeping kids good by passing on a biblical worldview or getting them to know and accept the Truth. I'm all for this, but so often seeing youth ministry as primarily for keeping kids good makes you into the moral police, meaning you should be evaluated by how many conversions or how many sober virgins you have in your ministry.

This emphasis, sadly, puts the focus not on what *God* does,

or how *God* is moving and living, but on what *we* do. *We* control God's action by making kids into something.

Many mainline/liberal American congregations tend to finish the sentence by saying that *youth ministry is for...* making more Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, or whatever your denomination might be. As a matter of fact these denominations have given a good amount of attention to youth ministry in the last decade or so, because they've come to realize that if they don't, they'll have no more congregations and be left with empty buildings. Youth ministry becomes the department that creates new denominationally-loyal members. This too has its importance, but it makes you more the denominational rep than minister of the gospel. It too directs focus away from the action of God.

What I'm hoping to emphasize to you is that the real heart of ministry is the amazing privilege of seeking God, of seeking to place yourself inside God's very action in the world. The heart of youth ministry is to try to articulate how and where this God acts and moves, and then constructing practices and activities that honor and seek for that place where God moves.

I hope you can see that I think that doing *ministry* is not so very far apart from doing *theology*. Ministry is about participating in the action of God and theology is simply the articulation of where and how this God acts.

So my advice to you is to *think*, to *articulate* where this place of God's action is found. *Where is the event where God shows up?*

So back to my radical statement at the beginning...

Don't be concerned with loving young people in your ministry. If you're only in this youth ministry thing to love kids, you'll die; you'll never be able to love enough; you'll soon be burned out. Because after all, you're loving them in your own strength, trying to hone your own action.

Rather, *seek the mystery of God*. And in doing so, you'll discover an amazing reality: You can't love young people more than God does. Participating in God's own action, which is to love

young people, thrusts you deeper into loving them than you could have ever imagined. But *loving* them is not your job; rather, it is the abundant outpouring of participating in God's action, of being swept into God's own love for these young people.

Seeking God's action is a freedom. It frees you to be a person, to be yourself, to be one swept into God's loving action. Ministry is born here, and our love for young people, for their very person, starts here as well.

After all, Jesus' ministry was not to the world, Jesus' ministry was to His Father, and near his Father, Jesus was swept into His Father's love for the world.

So don't focus on loving kids. Focus on seeking and joining the action of God. And then you'll have love for kids, yourself, and God's church.

Your Friend,

Andrew Root

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