

Where the students are

By Mark Moder

In Luke 5, we find the familiar story of Jesus coming in contact with fishermen who had been out all night fishing, but arrived back to shore without catching anything. Zip, Nada, Nothing. *Skunked.*

Then Jesus has the audacity to tell these tired fishermen to head back out. I can almost hear the conversation... "You're doing it all wrong," Jesus says. "You need to fish on the OTHER side of the boat." ("There's a concept," Peter says sarcastically to his brother under his breath.)

Can't you hear Peter's thought process? "Who's this guy think he is, telling us how to fish? We're the experts here! This guy's a good teacher and all, but he's a carpenter. What does he know about fishing?"

But these fishermen, likely more out of respect for Jesus' teaching than for his fishing prowess, grudgingly got into their boats, and headed back out.

You know the rest of the story. They immediately caught so many fish that their nets started to tear and their boats began to sink. They hurried back to shore, amazed at this new Teacher; and fell on their faces. Jesus responded to their shock and awe with a challenge: "Follow me... and from now on you will catch men, not fish."

To quote Napoleon Dynamite's brother... "That's what I'm talking about."

I signed up in youth ministry 20 years ago for *that* kind of fishing.

Youth workers today are better educated, have more resources, go to more conferences and overall have greater support from congregations and church boards than ever before. **So why aren't we catching more fish?**

We should be experts at fishing; with all our cool gear, our experience, our flashy lures and our well thought-out fishing strategies. But honestly, doesn't it seem like we catch and release the same kids week after week in our services? It's like fishing in a bathtub.

Several years ago, after a decade of working with teenagers and fishing with marginal levels of success, a friend challenged me to fish on the other side of the boat. This other side of the youth ministry boat is called **"The Campus."**

My prior perception of Campus Ministry was:

- The school doesn't want me there.
- I don't know what to do even if I could get on campus.
- I'm busy enough trying to take care of my church's kids anyway.

Campus Ministry is nothing new to many people. The parachurch groups are pretty much the experts here. Young Life, Youth for Christ, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Student Venture and others have been doing it and doing it well for years. What's new is that the church is finally beginning to see the campus as a viable mission field. There are amazing opportunities for churches to impact and reach students in public schools.

Church-based paradigm vs. school-based paradigm

Most youth workers free-associate the term "Campus Ministry" with Campus **Clubs** and summarily tune out. That's not what I'm talking about.

I want to challenge you to think very differently. Most youth pastors are trained to view youth ministry through the lens of the local church. "Here are the kids I'm responsible for. I need to train and

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INVOLVEMENT IN EVANGELISM

which helps expose every teenager to the gospel in a personal and culturally relevant way.

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disciple these students, protect them, plan events for them etc. If my youth group is 10% of the size of the congregation, then I've done my job."

I'm sorry, but that's bunk.

I am not just a youth pastor to my church. I am a youth pastor to *my city*. I have 15,000 students God has sent me to reach. I have a salary, a budget, a calling and a team of students and leaders I am called to mobilize to impact those 15,000 students. I will not be graded on a curve. I am a missionary to every teenager in this area. We need to keep asking ourselves if "every student" *really* means "EVERY" student!

What does a school-based ministry paradigm look like?

Let's try to view what a church's youth ministry program might look like through the lens of a school-based ministry paradigm. (See chart below.)

Immediately you can see a marked difference between the two paradigms. Certainly this type of ministry philosophy could create a conflict between you and your senior pastor, if he does not see the value in what you are doing.

Casting vision in this area is extremely important or you may find yourself out of a job. And you may not be able to do all that is in your heart to do, or all that others are allowed to do in their places

of ministry. That's okay. We need to start where we can.

When I moved to my community nine years ago, the youth pastors had no presence on – and little relationship with – the schools in town. We couldn't even eat lunch there. Today we have a fantastic relationship with most of the schools and the school districts in our area. What changed? How did it come about? And what can you do?

Here are a few easy things...

1. Find a need and meet it.

So often we go about things the wrong way. Every youth worker should read Dale Carnegie's classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Too often we go into a school with an agenda, basically saying in not so many words, "Here's what I want you to do for me."

Flip it around. What if someone you didn't know stopped you in the foyer at church and wanted to have access to your students for something. Not gonna happen, right? Roadblocks go up; hoops for them to jump through suddenly appear. But if that person begins to volunteer and proves himself over time... now that's a different story. We need to be asking, "What can I do to help you?"

We have a program at the high schools in town called "Freshman Connection."

Church-Based Ministry Paradigm

vs. School-Based Ministry Paradigm

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| -plan events around the church calendar | -plan events around the school calendar |
| -all events are held at the church | -strategic events are held at the school |
| -mobilize volunteers for church programs | -fill school programs with volunteers from your church |
| -spend a ton of your day at the church office | -spend significant time at the school |
| -expect students to come to you | -initiate involvement with the school and its community |
| -services are designed as outreach opportunities for the unchurched | -services are designed as opportunities to train Christian students to impact their friends |
| -small groups are organized around common interests | -small groups are organized around common schools |
| -volunteer staff only work with the teens at church | -volunteer staff are assigned one school to impact |
| -the church building sits empty most of the week | -the church building is readily available to schools for use |

JOIN NOW!



The National Network of Youth Ministries links youth workers for encouragement, spiritual growth, and sharing resources in order to expose every teenager to the gospel of Jesus Christ, establish those who respond in a local church, and disciple them to help reach the world.

Join the Network

We need each other. We are better together! The Network links people on several fronts, from individual youth workers, to denominations, ministries and organizations, as well as other Networks. At the core is the Network Covenant signed by every Network Member. Jesus' prayer in John 17 compels us to unite "that the world may believe."

If you are not already a Covenant Member, please go online to www.youthworkers.net and click the "Join" button. Agree to the Network Covenant, fill out the form and send your registration today. You can also call to join at 1-800-367-6696.

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The goal of the program is to connect incoming freshmen with solid upperclassmen as mentors. In its early stages, the program struggled for adult leaders to help facilitate the small groups and to run the team building stuff.

As a Network, we decided to help out. Pretty soon we were leading much of the program, because honestly, we were more comfortable than most of the teachers working with students outside of a classroom setting. Eventually the leadership dreamt of a day when they could take the program off-campus so students would focus better. But they had no money.

Hmmm....tough one. Today, all the freshmen in our school district meet in small groups in our churches for FREE, facilitated by many of the youth workers in town. Many of the mentors are students from our youth ministries. Volunteering in this program alone has opened more doors than we could ever have asked for.

2. Become an asset, not a threat.

Over the years, the church in America has created a culture of animosity between itself and the public school system. Screaming about evolution, fighting over sex education, demanding our rights, disrespecting the boundaries between church and state. We loudly proclaim the public school system's evils from our pulpits, and overtly organizing widespread pullouts in favor of home schooling.

I'm not saying that we should roll over on every issue, *but is it any wonder that schools are hesitant to open the doors to us?*

Our church sponsors a drive every August to collect school supplies for grade schools in our community. We collect thousands of items and donate them to nearby schools for needy children and teachers who would otherwise have to purchase classroom supplies out of their own pockets. How do you think they view our church?

I was talking to a principal a year ago about graduation and how cramped it always is. He lamented that space is so limited that each student can only have three tickets for family members. He added that the most difficult part of his job was telling kids that one of their grandmas wasn't going to be able to watch them walk. Last year that high school held their graduation at our church, and each student was able to have as many tickets as they wanted. We have become an asset to the schools in our area, not a threat.

3. Build relationships with teachers and administrators, not just students.

Think *U2 vs. Milli Vanilli*

Many of you probably don't remember who *Milli Vanilli* was. They made a huge splash in late 1980s with a big hit, (Give me a sec and maybe I can remember it... *nope, sorry*). All I remember is that at the height of their fame, it was discovered that they had faked their recording. It was someone else's voices on the album! They had tried to shortcut their way to success.

Long-term thinking says, "We're going to be here for a while, and we're going to do this the right way." You can't shortcut your way to success. Our Network has turned down opportunities to go for "the big kill" with some one-hit wonder strategies, voting instead for long-term relationship. Too many youth workers burn bridges with schools and skip town a year later, leaving others to pay for their foolishness.

The partnership I enjoy with the youth pastors enables us to initiate relationships not only with students, but with faculty and administrators. Youth workers help us in mobilizing students to care for other students, assist in connecting kids with other kids and love people in the school as individuals. You can't always say that about teachers. Youth guys do a better job of that than anybody.

—Greg Johnson, High School Counselor

Think *team*.

I graduated from high school near an Indian reservation. I was always secretly jealous that the Native Americans got to fish with nets, at times stretching them across the entire river, while I was stuck using my stupid pole. That is the picture I have of our Network today. I can fish with my church's one pole, or I can team up with my youth worker friends, church and parachurch alike, to "net" our community together—each one of us holding a corner of the net. We recognize that together we can harvest way more fish than any of us could by ourselves.

And you know where fish swim, don't you?

Fish swim in schools. ♻️



Mark Moder has been a youth pastor and an evangelist since 1985. He is the founder of "Reach the Campus," a non-profit designed to help teenagers and youth workers impact schools with their faith. He coordinates NINJA (the North Idaho Network of Jesus Associates) and currently serves as the Lead Youth Pastor for the Youth & Young Adult Department at Real Life Ministries, in Post Falls, Idaho. Mark has been married for 16 years to Heidi and has two boys: Cameron(12) and Drew(10).

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