

WILLING TO MINISTER TO YOUTH FOR LIFE

Once each year, every member of the National Network of Youth Ministries affirms the Network Covenant. It consists of six main points, one of which states, *"I claim by faith that my life will be characterized by...A Willingness to Minister to Youth for a Lifetime, should God so direct."*

Twenty-five years later, God has directed many youth workers to pursue a life investment in youth ministry. The Network Magazine contacted a number of "veteran" male and female youth workers to participate in this interview.

Six men responded. We had hoped that more (especially some of the ladies we contacted) would have given us their perspectives. However, those who did respond have some compelling thoughts for us.

WHY DO YOU THINK GOD CALLED YOU TO WORK WITH TEENAGERS FOR A LIFETIME?

 **Alan Mercer:** Well, I flunked out of every other type of class I took, so I figured I had better stick with youth ministry (seriously – lighten up – I work with junior highers). It was a combination of different adults who were faithful to me at a young age that pushed me toward youth ministry. It is this same desire to be faithful to those to whom I have a chance to minister that has given me a vision for life-long ministry.

 **Mark Jvert:** I'm still a youth minister because of a sense of call and delight. I enjoyed working in the secular work world, and had some success. But it wasn't fulfilling and truly satisfying. Ted Engstrom (who went home to be with the Lord in July 2006) sat next to me at a luncheon in February 1984. After hearing my story, he said to me, "You know, Mark, God desires the best business people and workers in ministry..." That

simple challenge set me on a course to yield to a series of promptings from the Holy Spirit and start full time in youth ministry five months later.

 **Keith Krueger:** At 10 years of age, I was called of God to be a missionary. I thought I would follow in the footsteps of a Jim Elliot or Nate Saint to some forsaken savage tribe. As I prepared to serve Him, He broke my heart for a different tribe - the American teenager. Like others, I started to do youth ministry for a couple of years as a stepping-stone to being a "real pastor." I soon realized the constant turnover in youth ministry was hurting them more than helping. God was saying to me to give them my whole lifetime. Teachers do it; so why shouldn't a youth pastor?

 **Thom Scott:** For me there is no more fertile field in in which God's Word can be planted. I've found that teens are much more sensitive to spiritual truths than adults, and the follow-through on commitments to Christ is more permanent than with older age groups.

 **Jim Snead:** My degree was in church music. At my first full-time job at a local church, I was asked to do music *and* youth. I knew *nothing* about youth ministry, but as I began to educate myself, I became burdened that the majority of teens does not know the Lord. I soon found myself sensing God's call to work with teens for a lifetime. I experienced what Ron Hutchcraft says: "I cannot NOT do this!"

 **Rob Paugh:** I still wonder what God was thinking! However, I will say that as I have gotten older, my perspective and experience have helped me to see things differently. When I was younger, it was much easier to connect with students, but a challenge to connect with adults. Now it is much easier to connect with adults and parents and step into their world with



a little more influence and credibility. I've seen the importance of the family unit as I have gotten older, and my effectiveness with parents has helped me meet kids' needs better.

WHAT HAS KEPT YOU IN YOUTH MINISTRY?



Mark: God used several men in my life as a teenager to draw me to Himself, and I want to be that kind of person to young people. God hasn't released me from that passion, so I'm still in! There is nothing like the joy of being a spiritual daddy to others, and then watching those kids lead others to Christ!



Keith: *First*, the call of God which has been affirmed over and over by family, the church, special times of anointing, and seeing the fruit in the lives of teenagers when I stayed long enough to let it manifest itself. *Second*, seeing my role as a real pastor with my gifting being used in a bigger context in the churches I have served. I never saw myself as a kid sitter/activities director for the teenagers of a church. I knew that I was their shepherd and pastor for a very important season in their lives. I was able to do everything the senior pastor could do, but did it with youth and their families. *Third*, consistently being part of a local Network of youth workers has helped me keep my commitment to serve the youth of our culture as long as God allows.



Alan: My first eleven years of ministry were spent in a town of 3,000, where I was the only paid youth worker. The Network relationships with guys in the next town were invaluable. Those men still encourage me when I see them.



Thom: Youth ministry is always fresh. There are always new ideas to try. There is a constant turnover of students to work with. Students have a much more energetic approach to their faith and a hunger to grow in their walk with Jesus. It is also a challenging age group to work with. But mostly as I have aged in ministry, it has been the reward of watching former student who are now adults impacting their families, community and world with the strength of their faith. You just don't experience that if you are only in youth ministry for the short term.

WHAT ROLE HAS NETWORKING WITH OTHER YOUTH WORKERS PLAYED IN KEEPING YOU GOING FORWARD?



Alan: It was the relationships with the people in my Network that helped me stick it out. The times when I was discouraged with ministry, with my church,

Alan Mercer has been in ministry for sixteen years. The first eleven were in a rural church in Indiana and the past five in Leawood, Kansas. He currently serves as the pastor of middle school ministries at Christ Community Church in Leawood.



Jim Snead is in his 21st year of youth ministry, having served for seven years as a youth pastor with the Church of the Nazarene, and 12 years with Youth for Christ as executive director in Vermont and church ministries director in Columbus, Ohio. Since 2005, Jim has been the Ohio state coordinator with the National Network of Youth Ministries.



Keith Krueger has been a youth pastor for almost 40 years. He spent 37 years as a youth pastor in local churches. For the past three years, he has been a "youth pastor to youth ministers" as the Great Lakes regional coordinator with the National Network of Youth Ministries.



Mark Jevert has spent 30 years in some form of youth ministry, primarily with Youth for Christ. He has served with YFC in the United States, as well as overseas in Estonia and Croatia. He currently is the executive director of Kalamazoo, Michigan YFC. He is a trustee on the YFC/USA national board of directors.



Rob Paugh spent four years on staff with Youth for Christ as a Campus Life director, before becoming a full-time youth pastor in the church in 1990.



Thom Scott served as a youth ministry volunteer and camp counselor while running an outdoor ministry in his early years. Following seminary, he was pastor of two large United Methodist churches in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Ministering as both a volunteer and a pastor has given Thom a view from both sides of the prism.



with parents, with myself, these men pulled me through. They encouraged me with a listening ear, a praying spirit, and words of "I have been there before; I know your pain" encouragement.

 **Jim:** My Network has been a tremendous encouragement to me over the years. I have come home from Network meetings so thankful that I stayed in youth ministry!

 **Keith:** Whenever I have suffered, made a bad choice, been in trouble with a parent, or was uncertain if I could do this one more day, it was fellow youth workers from the National Network of Youth Ministries who went out of their way to help me through. To realize that I needed the help of others to reach my own youth for Christ was so helpful. The relationships I developed have been life-long. The resources I have gained from others are great. Most importantly, the networking has led students to come to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior through our partnerships in the schools and community.

 **Mark:** In 1986, three youth pastors and I started meeting monthly for networking and accountability. We are all still in ministry. We shared joys, struggles and burdens. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes 4:12 about the strength of a three-cord strand was huge. I remember attending my first National Network Forum in 1991, and the connection with people around the country is still impacting my life and ministry today.

 **Rob:** The passage in the Bible that speaks of "iron sharpening iron" is what comes to my mind when I think about the role networking has played in my life. Clearly, the relationships I have shared with other youth workers have helped make me better at what God has called me to do. Now, I enjoy encouraging younger youth workers, and passing on some of the things that have been entrusted to me by others.

 **Thom:** The Network plays different roles: *First*, friendship – nothing is more helpful than building a group of friends who share common ministry experiences and frustrations. Only another youth pastor understands the dynamics of youth ministry. *Second*, the pooling of ideas and resources – over the years I have done many joint retreats and community outreach rallies via a Network with other youth ministries and pastors.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO HELP OTHERS STAY IN YOUTH MINISTRY FOR THE LONG HAUL?

 **Jim:** You need to know that this is a calling from God, and not just a job. If it is just a job, there will always be something better out there.

 **Rob:** Clarify and confirm your call. I don't think people who choose youth ministry as a career will stick with it unless they have a divine call from God to do it. It's like I didn't choose youth ministry... God chose it for me and I can honestly say if I were to do something else I would feel disobedient to what God wants for me. If you are just starting out in youth ministry, find an older, experienced youth pastor that you respect, and meet with him or her regularly and allow that person to mentor you.

 **Thom:** Find a church that shares your vision for ministry and one that will support you financially at an appropriate level. Nothing strains the ability to be obedient to God's calling and ministry like being stressed as you try to make ends meet and fulfill family obligations.

 **Alan:** Never quit learning. There is so much that others can teach you. No man (or church) is an island. Where I am currently serving, we have multiple staff on our youth team. However, it is still vital for me to have relationships outside of my church.

 **Mark:** Read, read, read. Feed your soul with the Word by taking a half-day away every month to "be still." Get a "Barnabas group" around you to celebrate and pray together. At our Youth For Christ training for new ministry, we call this a "got-your-back" group.

 **Keith:** Pour everything into building godly relationships between students and adults. Give away youth ministry to the adult staff in your church. Equip them to do the youth ministry. Enlist as many of the parents, single adults and grandparents as you can. I am convinced that you cannot do youth ministry alone. You need the gifts of the youth workers around you. To stay in it for the long haul, you need professional and peer support. Networking is critical! 🔄