

Perception is Reality

By Stephen Vander Hart

I have always prided myself on being a youth pastor. In my mind, I have secretly placed a higher value on leading the youth than leading the adults – like my friends who chose to become senior pastors.

Right or wrong, I love every aspect of youth ministry. I love the trips, the worship, the planning, the soccer games, and the late night conversations. I find myself telling those who ask me if I will ever become a “real pastor” that *youth ministry is why I am on this planet*. What I mean is that, for me, youth ministry has never been a stepping stone, but a life-long calling.

However, now finding myself firmly in the middle-age category, I have begun to experiment in some new ways of leading youth. When I was young, I was told the best way to lead kids was to be like one of them. So, being the over achiever that I am, my goal was to be a bigger “kid” than the students. Wilder, louder, jumping higher and staying up later were par for the course. It was a lot of fun, but unfortunately, did not have a lot of substance.



I discovered students do not need another friend as much as they need a “pastor” in the best sense of the word. If the word “pastor” means someone who is out of touch, mostly irrelevant, with a “pie in the sky” perspective, then you may disagree. However, if the word “pastor” means someone with spiritual authority to lead students where they may or may not want to go, then all of us must pastor our youth.

Actually, the entire congregation needs their youth person to be another pastor. Now, your church may think they need a babysitter to take the kids off their hands, but what they really need is a co-shepherd to challenge students and adults alongside the senior pastor. Youth directors bring a God-given agenda that may be slightly different than the senior pastor’s, and yet extremely complementary. If God has called you to lead the youth, then that calling extends itself to the church as a whole. The church community of adults and students both need to be led in the same direction, fostering true intimacy and connectedness.

Since this is true, whether paid or volunteer, it is time for those of us who are called to lead the youth to *step up and be a pastor*. Certainly in many churches this may not prove to be easy, but perhaps one needs to act like a pastor – with a measure of “adulthood” and professionalism – before one is recognized as a pastor.

Here are a few things to try.

Have weekly meetings with your senior pastor to talk shop. Discuss things that are broader than just youth ministry, like the direction of the church, planning for Sunday mornings, ideas for the men’s or women’s ministries, and general church-wide issues. Also, care for him as a colleague, and feed him as he feeds you. Spending regular time

together will help you merge the distinct perspectives God is giving each of you into one.

Get licensed, credentialed or ordained. Some youth pastors I talk to balk at this and see it as “jumping through hoops.” But just as coaches must follow the rules of the sport they love, we are called to humble ourselves and play by whatever rules are in place within our ministry cultures to effectively lead the team. Credentialing and ordination may be rules of the game. Follow them, and you will be more positioned to lead. Sometimes “jumping through the hoops” gives us additional credibility or freedom to serve.

Attend elder board meetings. Most church elder boards would love to receive your perspective and support. If you are not invited, remind them of your desire to be aware of and support church government. At these meetings, remain genuinely interested in the entire agenda and broaden your perspective to care about ministries besides family and youth as they are discussed.

Dress for the entire church body. In the book *Dressed for Success*, the author highlights a rock solid principle, “Perception is Reality.” For many adults, a pastor dresses a certain way on Sunday mornings. You may not be able to lead adults as well if they view you as a “big kid.” Dressing in a way that appeals to parents will open many more doors than it closes. Your kids are much more flexible than the adults, and will tolerate a tie, jacket – or whatever in your church culture communicates “professional” – better than the adults tolerate a tee shirt and shorts.

It is important to be yourself, but you are not selling out when your goal is to be all things to all people, including the parents and other adults you are called to lead.

Steph Vander Hart is the pastor of student ministries at CrossPoint Church in Chino, California. He has been a member of the National Network of Youth Ministries since 1990.



A Pastor's Perception

From my perch, I find the congregation's perception of “youth pastor” is mostly controlled by his or her own self-perception. If he sees himself as just an “older youth” with a super-sized A-type personality, up on the latest sports stats, in tune with the latest hip music, and a computer geek, he's “a natural.” He never gets tired, seems to need no sleep, and is always ready to “be” with kids, even into the early morning hours. Boy, he gets a lot of strokes for this – for a while.

I worked with several who did that; they ended up lowering the average length of youth pastors' tenure.

One of the better youth pastors I have worked with was a man in his late fifties who knew he could not match his parishioners' activity schedule. He did not try! He served in a godly, fatherly – almost grandfatherly – way. He walked with God and cared for “his sheep.”

All, especially “his kids,” as he called them, loved him. His strength was biblical affirmation and loving, firm confrontation. Others, who like him served well, realized that times had changed since they were young and approached their ministry from a cautious, listening perspective that assumed, “I've got to learn where they're at before I try to lead them.”

What I look for in a youth pastor is maturity and the ability to model authentic godliness and integrity. A humble, teachable spirit is crucial to me. Spiritual fruit produces authority. It grows alongside of humility, honesty and spiritual maturity. One who is steeped in God's Word, who longs to be transparent and vulnerable, will communicate a spirit of acceptance, love and forgiveness. These are the very ingredients he himself experiences daily in Christ. It is his greatest ministerial asset! If this is transferred to others, everything else he does is bonus!

In short I give a hearty “yes” to Steph's four suggestions. From my experience, I would add one more:

If able, the youth pastor needs regular pulpit presence; preferably to preaching to the entire congregation, and not just in “youth services.” When not preaching, he can lead parts of services. Though the youth pastor ministers primarily to youth, his heart needs to portray compassion and love for the entire congregation. He does not have to be partisan to youth to be effective. ↻



Henry Wildeboer serves with Stephen at CrossPoint Church in Chino, California as the interim pastor of leadership.