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## **Vision Statement for Youth Ministry Leadership**

### The Foundation: Youth Ministry as Theological Practice

The grounding principle in my approach to ministry with adolescents begins with the conviction that youth ministry, as with any form of Christian ministry, is fundamentally a theological enterprise. Too often professionals in youth ministry, to their detriment, have shunned the reality that ministry is theologically formative. To speak of Jesus Christ is to speak of theology. To seek to be conformed into the Way of Jesus Christ is to speak of theology. If we in youth ministry seek to do anything it is to speak of and be conformed to Jesus Christ. To reject the theological nature of our work is to remove Jesus Christ from our youth ministries.

In beginning at such a starting point, all practices are then naturally scrutinized through a theological lens. This theological commitment acknowledges that theology goes deeper than the words we write, speak, and read, but is also learned and communicated through concrete practices and rituals. There is no such thing as a theologically neutral act. Questions like “What does this communicate about God and humankind?” can and should be applied to everything from a Bible study, ski trip, lock-in, or youth group t-shirt. As the youth minister begins to ask questions about the theological nature of practices, adults and youth will also begin to see how the Christian faith permeates every aspect of life. One might say that this theological reflection is a ministry in itself, rather than just a tool for ministry.

### The Context: Youth Ministry as Youth-Oriented Congregational Ethos

Upon reflecting theologically about the nature of youth ministry it becomes clear that the existence of youth ministry as it is popularly practiced in western Christianity is a sociological,

rather than theological, phenomenon. Societal structures have divided populations according to age-based categories, especially in the public education system, thus normalizing such divisions. Youth ministry bought into this division initially and seems to be in the process of rejecting itself as a separate entity from the wider ministry of the church. This new emphasis to move away from completely age-segregated ministry is a healthy transition.

While it is admirable that youth ministry is trying to shun the “one-eared Mickey Mouse” model of ministry it is also impossible to speak of change in youth ministry without speaking in the same breath of change in the church. As a community called by God to disciple all people into the Way of Jesus Christ, regardless of age, race, gender, or status, youth ministry is in essence a ministry of the church, not a ministry of a select group of paid professionals or dedicated volunteers. Youth ministry may contain said paid professionals and dedicated volunteers but should not be defined nor limited by them. Instead, these paid professionals and volunteers should serve as a gateway to creating a congregational ethos of youth ministry. When a congregation sees youth ministry as a vital part of its overarching mission adults will willingly accept youth into roles normally reserved for adults and be willing to deal with the almost certain inconveniences that will arise out of youthful passion and egocentrism. This may lead to “messy” ministry, but oftentimes messiness is a prerequisite to authenticity. Ministry to and with youth must continue the move out of age-segregation, past the involvement of families in ministry, and towards the total inclusion and integration of youth and adults within the Christian community.

### The Telos: Youth Ministry as Disciple-Making

After understanding that youth ministry is a theological practice and that it should occur as a function of the overall ethos of a congregation, the questions must be asked, “To what end?”

Why are we doing this?” Most simply, youth ministry has as its aim to make lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ out of adolescents. To do anything less would not be rightly called *ministry*.

The Possibilities: Youth Ministry as Imaginative Synthesis of Theological Reflection, Congregational Ethos, and Disciple-Making

If we begin not with structures (age divisions, programs, paid staff, etc.), but with these three foundational principles, a world of new possibilities open up. We have freedom to explore new and imaginative ideas within the context of youth ministry, bound not by what has been done in the past or by what is seen as successful in youth ministry circles, but bound only by the essential principles of youth ministry:

- By grounding ministry theologically, a centered-set is maintained that does not allow for an anything-goes atmosphere.
- By grounding ministry in congregational ethos, we maintain the unity of the Body of Christ and integrate young people into the full life of the congregation. This will lessen the divide between youth ministry and adult ministry, a gaping hole that seems present in the majority of churches.
- By grounding youth ministry in disciple-making, we keep the end goal in mind, ensuring that our theologizing does not devolve into abstract metaphysical speculation and that our congregational ethos maintains a distinctly Christian emphasis. This makes certain that we are actually doing *ministry*.

Youth ministry may (or may not) be found at a lock-in. Youth ministry may (or may not) be found in a confirmation program. Youth ministry may (or may not) be found on a youth retreat. But where theological reflection, a youth-oriented congregational ethos, and disciple-making intersect, youth ministry *will* be found.