

Youth Ministry's Image Problem
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Youth ministry is on the verge of an image problem.

Externally, youth workers are constantly evaluated. You are assessed by who you bring in (church kids, seekers, friends, etc.); how many show up (attendance records, performance sheets, etc.); what activities you accomplished this week, summer, year (how many trips, activities, contacts, Bible studies, etc.); and what you envision for the future (one, five, ten year goals). Additionally, your youth ministry budget is scrutinized by volume (how "big" the group is); cost per unit (young person= widget); and some sort of "return on investment" (baptisms, parental giving, etc.).

You would think youth workers would find refuge in other youth workers. But often, it feels like one more place you're scrutinized. There's endless "thanking God" for how the group is "growing," and how "far" someone is traveling for their next short-term mission trip (we're waiting for the first youth group that makes it to the moon) and the "opportunity" another has just been given to speak at the next big youth conference. It doesn't take long for the pecking order to emerge, even among peers.

It's no wonder youth workers quickly driven to the external. It's the place where your existence is validated. We think this fuels youth ministry's image problem. So much effort is given to maintaining an external image that youth workers get crushed under unrealistic expectations of students, parents, church leadership, and let's be honest, by your own youth ministry peers.

This is a death wish for the soul. External image will crush the image of God born in you. Little will be left but scraps of the real you as you seek to make yourself "meaningful" through what can become meaningless activity. It's not that youth ministry activity is meaningless, only that using it to justify your existence is deadly.

Come back to who you are. You are unconditionally loved by God. You have infinite worth as God's image bearer. And before you impressed anyone, you responded to the Spirit's nudge reaching out to adolescents by extending yourself with self-giving love.

Budgets can't justify image.
Attendance can't legitimize image.
Trips to the moon won't further image.

Image must come from an inward look where the Spirit resides, quietly calling you to stay close, love consistently, serve sacrificially, and exist faithfully. Ministry demands will always be there but they cannot ultimately define your image. Image definition comes from a different place and until we consider the source, youth ministry will continue to have an image problem. This new year, find a youthworker who is willing to journey with you toward heart and soul issues. Reclaim your God-created image from the inside out.

Excerpt from Group Magazine, Jan/Feb 2009