

Good Grief... Graduation

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I wasn't prepared for it. No one told me about it or trained me for it. It just happened.... I watched our first group of high school seniors make it to graduation.

They graduated... and I cried.

It actually took me by surprise. I remember asking myself, "What on earth is going on?" And it didn't take long for me to realize... that I loved them. I really did. Not all of them, all of the time, mind you. There were times in their turbulent teenage journeys when I wanted to ground, kick out, or strangle (metaphorically, metaphorically) them. But here I was at their graduations or on our final trip, or at our celebration, crying or carrying a pit in my stomach... remembering the highs, lows and bumps, realizing that they were moving on, and I was wasn't.

Leaving isn't so bad... unless you're the one "left."

Let's face it, we want our students to graduate, some more quickly than others. Ultimately, we want all of them to mature well, and be prepared for the next stage of their lives. For some beautiful reason, we get to take part in this metamorphosis in teenagers.

The point I realized, however, we've all invested time, energy, and relationship in them... we've invested love, loving them deeply. And when they graduate, they take a piece of us with them. We feel the void and smile with tears in our eyes.

As I said, no one prepared me for this transition.

No one asked me after the graduation season, "How are you doing?" Time was spent gearing up for the next event and the next season... still, I realized, that this next year would be void of the students our team had invested in and cherished.

Unless we're prepared to think that only the "youth pastor" feels these emotions, we need to recognize that our volunteer leaders are navigating the same transition. And my guess is, that their emotions are probably stronger. Consider that some of your volunteers may have been involved in the youth ministry much longer than you. Realize that some of these students are children of your volunteers' or their friends, or brothers and sisters of your volunteers' friends. They've done life beyond the "scheduled church events" and this time of graduation stirs up multiple emotions of love, dreams, and grief for the ending of a season.

How do we lead our volunteers through middle school or high school transitions. Here are a few thoughts...

Encourage Good Grieving

People handle grief in multiple ways over different time spans. You may have noticed that some volunteers have already started grieving. Others you really can't tell.

Watch for signs of grief in your volunteers such as sentimentality, comparisons, or fear for "next year" when this class is "gone." Some volunteers feel insecure wondering what

they will do when “their group of students moves on” and they may consider not volunteering anymore. There are times when volunteers can get too attached to students and this time of the year is devastating. This requires extra attention and potentially re-evaluation of their role as volunteer for the future. There is a necessity for good grieving:

- In your leaders meetings, take time to reflect on the year. Give your volunteers to talk about the highs and lows in their encounters with students. Take time to slow down and reflect and resist the temptation to merely charge ahead to the next event. Volunteers need the time and space.
- In more personal one-on-one times with your volunteers, ask them how they are doing. Talk with them about students that are moving on and ask them how they feel about it.
- Share your own journey. Normalize the feelings the whole team is certain to feel.

Create Good Celebrating

At any good event like marriage, graduation or birthdays, it seems very natural to celebrate the person(s) of honor. Youth ministries have the opportunity to use these natural times of transition to celebrate their students. It also gives our volunteer leaders to channel their feelings toward something redemptive.

- Instead of “roasting” students, consider 8th grade or senior “celebrations” where time is taken to share a few things we appreciate about the students. Use the time to highlight the great things the youth ministry team sees in the student. Any way that we can cheer on students by pointing out the “fruit” we see God growing in them is wonderful.
- Take a trip with your students and volunteers. Have a special time for middle school or high school graduates where there can be something that highlights this significant transition. I’ve discovered that this sacred time is a great way for students and volunteers to have significant conversations, reflecting on the past and dreaming toward the future.

Commit to Good Sending

Remind our volunteers that our team is doing a great job when we prepare students and send them on their way to the next stage in their lives. Consider what it means to send or commission your students:

- Have your volunteers write letters to their students encouraging them as they move toward their next stage in life.
- We have reserved foot washing as a significant rite of passage. Work with your volunteers to set up a ceremony where you and your volunteers wash your students feet and pray over them. In essence, you are saying, “I have enjoyed serving you, no go and do likewise.”
- Encourage your volunteers to connect their students to future mentors. Have volunteers call/email the next ministries students might connect with serving as an advocate for the student, ensuring a good baton pass, and that mentoring continues.

Good grief encourages me in two ways, based on Matthew 26.26-30.

Jesus’ heart is filled with the weight of the cross, grief over betrayal, love for those he has done life with, and hope for God’s will to be done through his efforts and the efforts of those who will become the early church. Jesus seems to grieve, celebrate, and

commission. There are certain times in ministry when it's worth it to slow down and embrace transition. May we all discover something beautiful in "good grief" as we journey with our volunteers toward this annual rite of passage.

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