

Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings? Is it having the biggest group at your winter camp? Is it having growing and active small groups with students who carry a Bible/notebook and are eager to learn? What do you talk about when people ask you to describe your youth ministry? What would cause you to feel like your youth ministry is effective?

Our descriptions, lists, and profiles mostly focus on the “here and now.” For too many years, I defined my success only in terms of temporary fruit. I believed if youth said they wanted to follow Christ and were actively living their faith that we had succeeded and could now move to the next “project.” I also believed the inverse of those kids who rebelled and made a stand against participating in the youth ministry and following Christ. This thinking, I now understand, was shortsighted. We limit ourselves with “small picture” thinking while God is only interested in the “big picture.”

After twenty-nine years of youth ministry there are many times I feel that I know less than when I started, but one thing I do know: there is a “long view” to youth ministry. Keeping my eyes on a

teenager beyond high school into adulthood gives me a greater glimpse of God’s perspective.

Here are three tentative conclusions (with accompanying comments) I have made which helps me navigate a healthy evaluation of success and failure in my own ministry:

This is not my ministry.

My role is to be a faithful servant/shepherd and to offer opportunities for youth to begin a relationship with Christ, grow in their faith, and serve Him. I cannot make anybody do these things or be a Christian. God completes the work as people choose to follow Him.

There are many different scenarios in the faith journey of youth.

- Youth may be great Christians throughout their time in the youth ministry but reject it in the college years.
- Youth may be growing Christians through middle school and reject it in high school.
- Youth may not follow Christ at all through their teen years, but come to Him later in life.



- Youth may do one of the first two scenarios and come back to the Lord in college or later in life.

No program or even a fully invested relationship can guarantee the path of a teenager in his or her relationship with the Lord. What works for one may not work for another. We are all different, and we have the freedom to choose to follow the Lord. We must accept these different journeys as a part of the youth ministry profile and remember this is God’s ministry.

Long view = Hope view

Opening my eyes wide to the possibilities of God’s work in a person’s life, at any time, offers me a whole new frame of reference to assess the “successes and failures” of ministry. I have learned after all these years (twenty-five of them in the same ministry) to never give up hope.

Some will measure their success by how many former students are now in full-time ministry, missions, etc. To hear them speak of those youth we would naturally guess they were active, growing Christians in their teen years; carefully groomed and nourished through the loving investment of youth leaders. However, over half of our youth who now serve God full-time in ministry or missions were not even Christians through most of their adolescent years!

The next time you sit in the “circle” and wait for your turn, in the moments that you are tempted to second guess your “success” – may God remind you that His work is not yet done. May He affirm in you the passion to continue your walk with youth beyond high school graduation into the rest of their lives.

The Long View