

LOVE WINS!

A Simple Strategy for Ministry Evaluation

Every youthworker has been there—late at night, cleaning up after an event, wondering whether the time, resources, and energy spent were really worth it. Good questions flood the mind:

“Did students walk away with anything positive that they didn’t have before they arrived?”

“Did God work in the way(s) we hoped and dreamt?”

“Was this plan really from Him, or was it merely something invented by us?”

“What about next time? Should there even BE a next time?”

I’m no youth ministry wise-man, but as I reflect on my years as a youth pastor I can definitely say that my perspective has morphed over time—and I suspect it will continue to change. I’ve tried many systems and models for strategic ministry to students—big-ness and smallness, technology and simplicity, cerebral and experiential, serious and whacky. And we’ll keep trying new things, because each has its place in a healthy ministry. But, how do we know whether our programming attempts are really WORTH it? Just what is the bottom line?

My strategy is becoming simpler by the moment. I remind myself and leaders that any attempt we make at ministry to students can ultimately be boiled down to one question. It’s the first question I’ve learned to ask during evaluation: How well were the students loved while they were with us? And it’s the last phrase on my mind when praying over a gathering or event: “Father—may these students be the best loved, most well-cared-for sheep in these local fields of Your grace.” Love—could it really be that simple?

If you haven’t noticed, God did a really good job on the Bible. Jesus told us that we’d be known by our love for each other (**John 13:34**); John said that love is the foremost evidence of God in us (**1 John 4:16–19**); and Paul went so far as to give vivid details about what love looks like (and what it does not). In **1 Corinthians 13**, the masterpiece unfolds.

I blush when I think about how often I’ve lived by the false pretenses of the first few verses of that passage. How often have I measured my effectiveness by the delivery of my messages? How numerous are the prideful moments when knowledge puffs me up? And how often have I conjured up a martyr-syndrome as the poor, underpaid, over-worked youth pastor who has really given myself “over to the flames” in the sacrifices I’ve made?

Paul says that while some of that may count for something, it is not what defines our success. Love is. Specifically, love is described in the following ways.

Patient and Kind—Do our students sense any vague notion of disapproval or condemnation on our part? Do we lecture more than we extend grace? Do we criticize more than we praise? In short, if WE were teenagers with imperfect lifestyles and real struggles (like we are as adults), would WE want to be in this ministry?

Not Envious, Boastful, Proud, or Dishonoring to Others—I recently heard Doug Fields speak about what he calls “ministry envy”—every youth worker’s temptation to inappropriately compare his or her ministry to the outward appearances of others. When we plan an event or gathering, are we prepared to be just as thrilled to minister to only a few students if the masses decide not to come? Do we feel defeated because the church across town seems to be gaining steam? Do we treat the

students that God brings as valued individuals rather than mere pieces of a greater mass assembled to stroke our egos?

Not Easily Angered, Keeping No Record of Wrongs—Are we quick to forgive and give second chances (over and over again)? I remember a particular pity-party I was having with myself at a winter camp when the guys in my cabin didn’t seem to take the chapel messages as seriously as I wanted them to. All kinds of defeating thoughts moved through my mind, including the idea of quitting youth ministry.

I prayed that God would help these guys see something of Himself during camp that would stick with them—but God wasn’t answering. That was until the last night as I was suffering through cabin time, which started as another exercise in futility—trying to find a way to help the guys get serious for two minutes! Suddenly, the most obnoxious guy of the bunch changed the entire tone when he said, “Jeremy, we really love you and we’re thankful for how many second chances you give us.” Fighting back tears was not easy as I realized that his thankfulness was not really about my character (deep down, I wanted to strangle them!) Instead, he saw something of God in me—a compelling answer to my prayer!

Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth—Being gracious does not mean avoiding the truth. It means that truth must be received in the context of a loving relationship or else it is stripped of its power (**Ephesians 4:15**). Jesus was full of grace AND truth (**John 1:14**), and never shied away from either.

One girl started attending our midweek gathering over a year ago. She would frequently try to intimidate other girls and interject obnoxious comments throughout my messages. I don’t know how often

I almost let her have it in front of everybody. Instead, I held my tongue and tried to love her. Other leaders and students began to follow. In response to the love of our leadership team, she still comes regularly—and while not yet fully devoted to Christ—is a radically different person from a year ago, and even participating in a small group.

Always Protects, Trusts, Hopes, and

Perseveres—One of a youth leader's most gratifying identity is that of a shepherd. As spiritual overseers, leaders, and teachers, we need to nurture safe environments where students feel *protected* against the notion that they have to fake in order to impress or earn approval. We must extend *trust* to students—even the really “messy” ones—by giving them significant roles and tasks within our ministries.

Like harvesters of sequoia trees, we need to be fueled by the *hope* that some day the tiny seeds we're planting will grow into pillars of strength and beauty. We need to *persevere* with our students in their journeys—redeeming their failures as moments to experience God's forgiveness and try again.

Love Never Fails—Finally, we need to decide whether or not we really believe God about this last quality—that love never fails. For much of my ministry, I've lived under the delusion that love was somehow a means to an end—a way to earn the trust of students so that they would eventually “bow the knee” to Christ. I still believe God uses love to that end. But I'm also becoming more convinced that love itself IS the chief end.

Now, before you assume I am ready to cast truth aside in favor of a more relaxed view about the centrality of teaching Scripture, spiritual disciplines, strategic programming, etc., think again! I

would not consider someone a loving youth leader who did not engage students in discipleship. It's just that my criteria for evaluating success are changing.

I serve at a well-staffed, generously resourced church—yet I cannot compete with the slick, attractive techniques of a media-driven culture. What I *CAN* offer students that they cannot get from MySpace, or Facebook, MTV, or text messaging is a real-life, incarnational love as Christ lives through me and my co-leaders!

As I'm writing this article, I am anticipating a staff meeting tomorrow where we will be evaluating a major event we co-sponsored over the weekend. Over a thousand people were in attendance. Hundreds made various decisions in commitment to Christ. But, the number one question I'll be asking tomorrow has nothing to do with any of that. Attendance will fluctuate. Commitments will be broken. But love NEVER fails.

Can you guess the question I'll be asking?

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