



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

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Youth Ministry
Shepherding -
Providing Care

Youth Ministry Training **Lesson Seventeen: Youth Ministry Shepherding—Providing Care**

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Who Cares?
- Anything Can Happen to Teenagers
- Why Care?
- Please Care!
- Caring Well

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Establish a personal identification with the struggles of adolescence
- Know the biblical basis of spiritual care and understand how the principles of effective caring relate to shepherding young people
- Identify strategies for reaching out to students with immediate issues and with deep hurts, and connect them to contemporary problems facing today's youth
- Plan for ways to enact various means and methods of spiritual care in youth ministry in their own ministry contexts
- Begin to articulate a philosophy of spiritual care that flows out of experiences, commitments, and passions

Introduction

Effective youth ministry practices rest on the concrete mix of discipleship and shepherding. It is often the love expressed and felt in the midst of adolescent growing pains that solidifies the impetus for a life committed to Christ. Just as Wesleyan theology embraces a life of personal holiness as the intense response to the mercies of God, the disciplines of young Christ-followers often flow out of gratitude for a faith community where hurts are healed and challenges overcome by the presence of caring mentors and friends. Youth workers care because Christ has done so for us, and in doing so bids those freed from that which would destroy them to “go and sin no more.”

Lesson Body

Who Cares?

In *Foundations of Pastoral Care*, Bruce Petersen notes pastoral theologian Thomas Oden's belief that pastoral care resembles a physician's care of the body, often called the care of souls. Pastoral care does surface as one of the traditional roles of the pastor. Historically, pastoral care encompassed four major responsibilities:

- Healing: overcome impairment and moving toward wholeness
- Sustaining: helping hurting persons endure and transcend their circumstance

- Reconciling: restoring broken relationships, both personal and communal
- Guiding: helping people to make wise choices and pursue mature lifestyles

Often members of the congregation find themselves in situations where they offer counsel to other people, including youth. Many youth workers use the term spiritual care to emphasize the relationship between a youth's physical, social, and psychological well-being and to frame our love for students as an outgrowth of our own life in Christ.

Recognizing that youth are often the most vulnerable of all sheep, the significance of spiritual care is unlimited and the significance of care in youth ministry is unlimited. Often these moments of vulnerability include awkward or painful moments in the lives of youth. These situations may appear at any moment. May all we do demonstrate how much we care!

Anything Can Happen to Teenagers!

All of us have no doubt had those moments when we thought we were going to die from embarrassment, when there seemed to be no tomorrow, when you would have just as soon skipped adolescence and gone straight to middle age! Even though we can laugh now, it was painful then. Understanding our own past helps us to be ready to receive the struggles of youth today.

Most of us get over embarrassing moments without long-range damage. But what about those “anything can happen moments” that were painful or difficult to handle? Would a couple of you share what one of those may have been?

As you look back on that, was there someone who was there to comfort you in that instance? If not, what would it have taken for someone to be a “champion” in your life in those moments?

We are probably all aware of the difficulties some teenagers face.

- Some are the results of poor choices made by the teenager—addictions, disorders, personal conflicts, violence, unmarried pregnancy, even incarceration.
- Some are tragedies that flow out of the actions of others—physical injuries, divorce or other family issues, poverty, victimization.
- Still others come from situations that no one could control or anticipate—health-related issues, handicaps, family illness or death, psychological illness.

Behind every challenging circumstance exists a need and an opportunity for someone to respond. Can youth workers miss these opportunities? They sure can. How? Some make the assumption that young people would rather not share their problems. Some don't commit the time to be present and available to teenagers in a way that builds rapport and trust. Others remain afraid or uncomfortable with talking about the struggles in their own life. They were too painful! More than pizza and fun programs, even more than compelling sermons and praise rallies, the deepest need for many adolescents from their youth workers is spiritual care.

Why Care?

Pastoral care forms a familiar biblical and historical basis for responsive and restorative ministry offered by Christ-followers, though in recent years the term often has been associated more specifically with clergy or the specialized work of counseling. Since we understand that professional and lay youth workers share equally in caring for the needs of young people, many prefer to use spiritual care both to identify the role more broadly and to emphasize the importance of holistically connecting youth to the source of all care, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Caring youth workers also recognize how developmental realities in adolescence lend themselves to linking life lessons learned through struggle and pain to what God may be doing in our lives to disciple us and help us grow. Spiritual openness may never be a prerequisite for spiritual care, the opportunity for commitment and growth is always woven into the fabric of reaching out with the love of Christ.

The Biblical Basis of Spiritual Care

The English word “pastor” derives from the Latin word meaning “to feed” or literally “to pasture.” The image is that of a shepherd who brings the flock to graze where nourishment is plentiful. The Spanish expression of the familiar opening phrase of Psalm 23 makes the connection: Jehovah es mi pastor—The Lord is my shepherd. From Jacob to Moses to David, shepherding framed Israel’s understanding of God’s leadership, protection, and discipline.

The prophets agree. Isaiah described God as one who “leads His flock like a shepherd, gently” (40:11), and Ezekiel and Jeremiah contrasted poor leaders as those who saw the sheep only as a means for personal gain and did not care for them. They did not strengthen, heal, or bind up the weak and their lack of care had scattered and caused Israel to wander from God. Unmistakably, the expectation was that those who lead should do so out of a heart of love that shows its depth in caring for the most vulnerable of God’s creatures.

Jesus assumed the identity of the caring shepherd as His own, and references to the metaphor abound in the gospels. John chapter 10 expresses—

- Intimacy— “the sheep listen to his voice . . . he calls his own sheep by name”
- Commitment— “the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” that the shepherd feels for his flock.

The provision of the Good Shepherd was “life to the fullest” (Jn 10:10). Matthew 9:36 illustrates Christ’s compassion for the hurting by describing them as “like sheep without a shepherd.”

Jesus’ commission for His followers to make disciples accompanied Jesus’ promise that He would be with them until the end of the age. Peter affirmed that those who live out Jesus’ model of caring for the flock could be assured that “when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory” (1 Pet 5:4). He assured His readers that those who led with humility toward each other could cast all of our cares on Him, knowing that His humble sacrifice on our behalf assures us He cares for us in the same way (v. 5-7).

Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, in the *The Godbearing Life*, note the shepherding role expanded for pastors to include the oversight of souls. They continue that youth ministry focuses on relationships not because of who teenagers are but who God is. God is a relationship . . . Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . and significant relationships with other Christians matter because they teach us something about what God is like . . . the One who can love us passionately enough to suffer willingly on our behalf. Youth workers care for young people as a reflection of the nature of God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 echoes this divine relationship of God's essence and our care for each other in a way that applies to us all: "Praise be to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." The intersection of personal struggles and God's grace provides an avenue of reaching others with the same compassion that we ourselves have experienced. We look back at our distresses as stepping stones to a deeper understanding of the hurts of teenagers. We know that growth and spiritual strength comes not in spite of but because of the burdens that we bear.

Jesus was described in Hebrews 4:15 as one who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because He has encountered them Himself. As we grow in faith and trust in He who provides for us, we regard our current sufferings as reference points for feeling alongside of those around us. In the same way that Paul was comforted by Titus who had been comforted by the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:6-7), together we form a community of wounded healers whose care for each other flows out of Christ's love and back into comfort for ourselves in times of need, and in doing so find rest for our own souls (Mt 11:28-29).

Paul understood his role as a leader as being one to prepare others to serve so that the church may become stronger (Eph 4:12). Shepherding and spiritual care is never confined to the pastoral position. Every believer is a minister and every youth worker has the opportunity to "pastor" young people, protecting and providing for their well-being. Pastoral care is simply spiritual care shown in the name of Jesus, and is carried out by any compassionate relationship that focuses the needs of the person receiving our personal care toward the One whose love reaches to the deepest hurts with profound healing and grace. Those who do not serve in pastoral occupations and those who are pastor-leaders both have the duty to train and empower others to share in the mission of compassion and care.

It is easy to look at the miracles that characterized Jesus' ministry to those who were sick, sorrowful, or oppressed and lose sight of the fact that these acts of kindness and healing were not ends in themselves. Time after time His physical interventions were followed by instructions to follow a life of faith and to leave their life of sin behind. Nothing was more important than their relationship to the Father, and Christ's presence brought that divine encounter down to where they could see it and touch it. He spoke out against those who would expect signs and wonders for self-serving purposes and miss the true reason for what had taken place. If faith did not follow, the opportunity for wholeness became only a random act of kindness, a good thing for the short term but without eternal benefit (Lk 17:11-19). The same is true for Christ-followers.

Understanding that the focal point of life is a human's relationship with God relates all other aspects of life to it. Though certainly not every problem is a spiritual one, a person's faith is a link to their greatest resource, both directly and communally. To those in pain, Jesus offered rest and relief, knowing that a response of gratitude to the mercy of God laid the foundation for spiritual stamina and growth. As we care for the hurts of young people, we must never lose sight of the "bottom line" of spiritual care—a heart that finds its rest and its strength in Christ.

Please Care!

"What can I possibly do?" that was my first thought as I walked out of the senior pastor's office. I was serving in my first summer youth ministry experience, hardly out of youth group myself, when I was asked to visit the hospital room of a teenager injured in an accident who was related to someone in our church. Realizing that I had never been hospitalized myself and had only visited a hospital when visiting one of my own family members, I hardly felt equipped to respond to this need. Maybe it was seeing him connected to all those tubes as I entered the room that made me quickly sense that "connection" was just what Bill needed—knowing that another person was present and available to console, encourage, and care for him. Frequent stops to visit over the next several weeks led his family into involvement in the church and eventually to a commitment to Christ.

How Care Impacts the Lives of Youth

As we commit ourselves to caring for young people, it will become evident that some of the struggles they face come out of the same context as those affecting adults. Severe or chronic illness or injury, death of a loved one, family conflict, or loneliness and isolation that may accompany relocation to a new home, community, or situation are just a few of the common circumstances that can bring a sense of crisis into the lives of young and old alike. Even peer pressure and self-esteem issues are often present in adult experience as they are in teenagers' lives. The difference is how an adolescent is able to process them at their stage of development and experience. There are also, however, challenges related specifically to their stage of life for which those who work with youth will be wise to have awareness and sensitivity.

As noted in earlier lessons, Erik Erikson's study of human development defined the primary task of adolescence as identity vs. role diffusion (failure to clarify identity). The gap between sexual maturity and being able to sustain oneself financially and socially widened as the economic and educational climates began to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Physical changes such as bone and muscle growth and sexual characteristics create fluctuations in appetite and energy. Differences within or across genders can bring on adjustment difficulties and antagonism. Mental and emotional transitions move young teenagers from concrete to abstract thought and older ones to mid-lobe thinking that enhances idealism, passion, and romance. Moods can fluctuate with body changes, and a lack of control or acting on impulse are common to many youths. Socially, teenagers moving from parental oversight to a peer focus of relationships, in the natural progression toward adulthood, search for the answers to three questions related to three essential needs:

- Who am I?—Identity
- Do I matter?—Belonging
- Am I competent?—Autonomy

Les Parrott in *Helping the Struggling Adolescent*, identified common paths adolescents take in their search for identity:

- Testing and clarifying family relationships
- Questioning and sometimes rebelling against authority
- Seeking status among some of their peers and excluding others
- Seeking the opinions of mentoring adults outside of their parents
- Fashioning some of their perspectives from both the immediacy of role models and more distant yet still powerful cultural “idols” and icons
- Experimenting with “grown-up” behavior

As changes and struggles occur, youth handle them by

- Holding them in
- Acting them out
- Working through them

For the preferred third option, nothing is more vital than significant adults who help young people make the transition healthy and whole. The best conditions for growth occur when youth feel accepted unconditionally, that they are with someone trustworthy and real, and that they are deeply understood. This combination of warmth, genuineness, and empathy prove essential traits of those who can effectively work in partnership with the Holy Spirit to help sustain and guide youth through turbulent times.

The primary aspect to providing care in crisis is to create a place of safety in which students can feel loved and confident of the person with whom they can share their problems. Teenagers need a youth worker who will listen to their story, help them dig deep to understand what is really going on, allow for them to express their feelings, help them find appropriate outside help if needed, and be assured that hope lies in the healing and restoring work of the Holy Spirit. Rich Van Pelt and Jim Hancock, in *The Youthworker’s Guide to Helping Teenagers in Crisis*, provide several questions when youth workers become aware of situations that cry out for caring in the life of a teenager:

- What is the perceived problem? What is the identified problem (the core issue behind the immediate situation)?
- What are the positive and negative outcomes that can result if it persists? What is desirable? What will it take to move toward that outcome?
- What resources are available to reaching the desired outcome? What are the roadblocks?
- Who else should be involved (family, school, church, professional help)?
- What are the steps that must be taken? What ongoing support and feedback is needed?
- What is the timetable?

Pastoral counseling is an area where professional youth workers can equip themselves should they have opportunity, interest, and prevalent need in their ministry setting. A variety of models for pastoral counseling exist, yet most of them revolve around the same principles and steps:

- Establish relationship and rapport
- Explore and define the problem
- Establish and structure goals
- Encourage them to work toward attaining their goals
- Evaluate and follow-up as needed

In many countries, there are legal concerns involved in attempting to counsel youth. The lack of specific training and experience may set up a misunderstanding of what a youth workers can and cannot do. Legal issues such as the duty to report, duty to warn, needs for documentation, and conflicts of interest are just a few of the barriers to adequately providing this level of care. In such countries, the best thing a youth worker can do if the problem requires extensive work or extended attention is to refer the teenager to a professional.

Caring Well

Whether simply being present and available or making sure that professional help is needed, youth workers who care about students will commit themselves in the pattern of Jesus to incarnational approaches, “dwelling among” the teenagers they care for, being transparent and vulnerable, and most important to connecting them to the divine resources of grace and truth that reside in our Heavenly Father (John 1). In any crisis that an adolescent may face, patient and persistent listening does makes a difference.

Active listening remains the most important tool in the caring youth workers belt. Fully engaging your attention and focus in listening to what teenagers both say and feel unearths hidden emotions and issues, helps take away fear, facilitates true learning, and ultimately helps a person to be their own counselor. It involves two basic ingredients:

- Reflection: responding to the emotional content of what is being said (and not being said) and “hearing” what is being felt
- Clarification: asking questions in the process to gather additional information that together can be explored more thoroughly, and expressing a clear desire to understand

As youth workers actively listen to a teenager in the midst of their problems, being fully attentive, communicating non-verbal openness, and responding appropriately is key. Some things to avoid include interrupting, judging too hastily, giving advice prematurely or excessively, or making references unduly to your own experience and subtly diverting the focus of what they are feeling. Good listeners will listen with the whole person, with acceptance, with their own limitations unpacked, with an interest in the “story behind the story,” and with God’s help.

Active listening describes a specific skill that caring people develop with practice. Some people might be more attentive to people than others due to their natural disposition or due to

formational influences when they were young. However, we all need to cultivate basic listening skills.

Young people don't always know about making a formal appointment. They ignore the idea of privately sitting down with someone, and will often just blurt out what's on their mind to someone they trust. Youth workers should be ready to seize those opportunities to care. In such situations, youth workers can affirm them for asking and work to uncover what they may really be searching for. It is also possible to connect what they discover with applicable biblical truth in natural terms, guiding them to do their own thinking. Sometimes they will pull from within themselves the help they need, and other times they will sense a more extended conversation would be a good thing. In either case, being "rehearsed" in good listening skills can be a real advantage to caring in the few minutes that young people may give you to do so!

As part of your homework assignment for this lesson is information dealing with confidentiality and community resources. These are two areas that need careful, serious consideration in your ministry. Remember, in the midst of pain, God is often up to something good! As New Testament Christians did, "We also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us!" (Rom 5:3-5).

Application

Identify local agencies that can support you in providing care to youth. Using the large categories of family relationships, personal health, as well as social challenges. The possible list should include school counselors, a drug and alcohol abuse agency, crisis-pregnancy program, family mediation and legal service, area social worker, poison control center, child protection services, crisis center or telephone line, recovery support group, Christian counseling services, psychiatric hospitals with specialized units for adolescents, hospital emergency special care units, adolescent stress unit, eating disorder treatment program and support group, and community health center. The entry should include the name, a possible contact person, address, and phone number.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Is there anyone who, in the midst of the specific situation you shared, had a person who was on your side, who reached out to you, or who continued to like you even when embarrassing things happened? Tell us about them. If not, what would it have taken for someone to encourage or console you at that moment?

What aspects of caring do you find appealing to you personally? Which ones create fear of anxiety in you? Which ones do you believe you are good at? In what ways can we develop a caring team to help us in areas in which we may feel inadequate?

What are the challenges adults face in dealing with the Issues of Care?

What are some of the advantages that youth workers have when dealing with adolescent issues in a church-related setting?

What areas of struggle do you believe your experiences, training, and personal gifts equip you best for? Which ones do you feel inadequate to address?

What anxieties or fears might keep you from listening well?

What situations would require you to seek help from other professionals?



Nazarene Youth International

