

# Creating a Home-Run Hitting Team

A Team Approach to Parish Youth Outreach

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Youth in what? Outreach? You've got to be kidding. They're not mature enough. They don't have the "right" training. They haven't studied at a seminary for four years. They're too preoccupied with the "necessities" of life—cars, clothes, school, extra-curriculars, jobs, and boyfriends/girlfriends. Over half of them don't even come to church anymore. And even if they did come, how would I organize and mobilize them? Let's say they did have time available, they certainly wouldn't use it for the church. Getting them to commit to something is like trying to move a Mac truck with your pinky. You can just hear them now: "Whatever! That's b-o-o-o-ring." And, quite frankly, just between you and me, outreach is too important of role in the church to leave to a bunch of teenagers, right?

Wrong! Unfortunately, our sinful nature gets the best of us at times doesn't it? The devil plants all kinds of lies into our hearts that lead us off track. If that isn't enough, the success-driven world curtails our thoughts as well. How many times have our words, actions, and inferences given the impression to youth and the rest of society that youth are substandard in value? Do these sound familiar? "Kids don't know anything." "Let the kids be kids." "It's too early to have them concerned about such things." "You're not important until you're an adult." In our dog-eat-dog world, everything must be "perfect." There's no room for mistakes. And therefore, there's no room for a boy to do a man's job. "This job is for the professionals," we say.

But that's when we need to go God's Word for strength and guidance. It's there we get back onto the road of God's will. It's there we find that youth and outreach really do go together. In fact, they are like baseball and glove. They were made for each other. Let's take a sky-cam view of God's will for this great combination. And then let's see how our youth can "hit homers" with the rest of the congregational team!

## **God's Word – The Team Manual**

### *1. No One Sits Out*

When talking about outreach, it's always good to start off at the foundation. When God commanded us (in Matthew 28) to "make disciples," he was speaking to everyone; youth included. He gave no height restrictions or age requirements, just simple instructions for all. Therefore no young Christian can say, "That's not for me!" Rather, each one is compelled by the Spirit to announce thankfully like Paul, "I believe, therefore, I have spoken" (2 Cor. 4:13), and like Peter and John who witnessed their faith to the Sanhedrin "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Every Christian has a deep-down yearning to share their faith. It's in our Spirit-filled blood to give a testimony of Christ whenever and wherever we have the chance. Therefore, it's so vitally important to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). As pastors, teachers, and staff ministers it is our responsibility to teach and equip (Ephesians 4:12), model (Titus 2:6-7, 1 Peter 5:3), and challenge and inspire (1 Timothy 4:7-12, Hebrews 10:24-25) outreach to the young people in our midst.

### *2. Off the Practice Field and Into the Game*

"Making disciples" is serious business. There is urgency in this command and all Christians have been charged with it. God spells out the "how" of making disciples by giving us a balanced approach to ministry: "teaching" and "baptizing." He commands us to teach and equip people with God's Word, and reach out to

others with the Good News. But somehow the devil has apparently duped a majority of congregations into thinking that “mission-mindedness” is only for mission churches and that established congregations must concentrate on growing spiritually.

So we must ask: What good is a team if they spend all their time training, but never play in the game? “In his book *The Everyday Commission*, Dann Spader reports that in his study of a hundred ministries that claimed to be committed to fulfilling the Great Commission, ‘eighty-seven of the one hundred had all of their programs targeted to helping believers grow’” (Mittelberg, 244). They targeted on practice time. Now don’t get me wrong, spiritual growth is vitally important. It’s food for our soul, and we can’t move without it. But God tells us, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ... The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – He will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22, 25). The point is that we should not neglect outreach (game time) in the name of spiritual growth. There needs to be balance—just as we see in Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus didn’t just gather in holy huddles and seclude himself from the rest of the populace. No, he played the game.

If we gear our ministries solely to spiritual growth and inward centeredness we are missing one half of the Great Commission—sharing the good news with THE LOST. The difficulty is that “most Christians have very few non-Christian friends” (Mittelberg, 163). They lose them within two years of becoming a Christian. What this means is that the opportunity to witness often needs to be sought out. Relationships must be intentional and well-planned out. (The Lost Sheep – Mt 18:12; Zacchaeus – Lk 19:10; Philip & Nathaniel – Jn 1:43-44; the Blind Man – Jn 9:35).

## **A New Game Plan**

In order to impact our youth in outreach, we first need to learn to look at outreach in a new light. There needs to be a changed perspective on how we view and do evangelism. To do this we need to keep in mind some relevant concepts: Modeling is Key, Training is Essential, People are Different, Outreach is not just for the Outreach Team, and a Point Person is Recommended.

### *1. Modeling Is Key*

Leaders need to model an evangelistic attitude. They need to show that they deeply care for lost people and take practical measures to reach them. A leader can’t simply say outreach is important and not live it out in their daily lives. Actions need to support these words. And when people see these actions they tend to “catch” them also.

In 2 Kings, we see a tremendous and powerful example of a youth in personal outreach. This young girl, taken captive by a band of Arameans, shared her faith with her master, Naaman, commander of the Syrian army. The result: Naaman was healed of his leprosy and his burden of sin. He became a believer in the one true God. (2Kings 5: 15, 17).

How could this young girl have such a huge impact on the life of such an important man? What motivated her to speak out like she did? The only obvious answer is that she had been taught from little on in her home and from those around her that God is the only true God, and that he is real and powerful. On top of that, she showed a definite care for the lost. She looked past the fact that she was a captive and sought what was best for Naaman. She recognized his hopelessness and couldn’t help but tell him about the God of hope.

What’s to be learned from this? We cannot forget the important impact modeling has on our young people’s faith-life. As a congregation and as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, we need to support and equip the parents and other mentors in the congregation so that they can consistently model and teach outreach to the youth. I personally have seen the effects of good modeling of outreach by some parents in my own congregation.

One girl has taken her mother's modeling to heart. Every once in a while she brings one friend or another to church or some kind of youth event. She constantly asks the adults in fellowship after church "What do I say to my friends? How do I get them to learn about God?" She can't stand the fact that her friends don't have a relationship with Jesus. She cares for them and wants what's best for them. And it pains her on a daily basis to know she may not see them in heaven.

## *2. Training is Essential and People are Different*

We must face the facts. Even though everyone has a deep yearning to share their faith, not everyone is a gifted "evangelist." Not everyone is like John the Baptist, Paul, or Billy Graham. So they avoid outreach like the plague. This goes for youth as well. They fear outreach because of a lack of modeling, training, vision casting, encouragement, and challenge. That's where we, as leaders, can help. We need to stop expecting people to fit into a cookie-cutter mold, and instead, empower them to do outreach the way God designed them to.

The Bible gives us clear examples of six different personal outreach styles: Confrontational (Peter in Acts 2), Intellectual (Paul in Athens), Testimonial (Blind man in John 9), Interpersonal (Matthew in Luke 5:29), Invitational (Woman at the Well), and Serving (Dorcas in Acts 9). For more information on these styles see Willow Creek's Evangelism course called, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (they have a youth edition as well). The youth of your congregation are bound to fit into one of these styles. Let's let them know that they don't have to fit a preconceived notion of what an evangelist should look like and empower them!

## *3. Outreach is not just for the Outreach Team*

Many churches have outreach teams. Their job, often with the Pastor at their side, is to think up new ways to reach the lost through flyers, special events, and other types of innovative programs. In their quest, they often are held back because of lack of ideas, money, and support from other leadership in the church. A better approach might be to have the outreach team permeate itself throughout all the other ministry areas. They can train, model, encourage, inspire, and challenge the other ministries to think about how they can do outreach without adding any new programs, but by tweaking what they already do. God urges us through Paul, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). In the case of youth ministry, the outreach team would challenge the youth and their leaders to ask themselves: "How can we reach our lost friends and neighbors through service opportunities, youth events, and anything else we do?"

## *4. Point Person Recommended*

Finally, outreach has a bad rap. Someone needs to partner with the pastor and called staff to champion the cause of outreach. Therefore, a Point Person is recommended. This person's task would be to lead and inspire the outreach team, train and equip people by liberating them from their false perceptions of evangelism, model a concern for lost people, and challenge all the people and ministries of the congregation. One note of caution: If at all possible, try not to give this job to someone who is already serving in another part of the team. For example: Don't try to give the youth minister or small group coordinator this position. They've already got enough on their plates! More things to do may take away from their focus and productiveness in one or the other areas or maybe even both. (1 Corinth. 12:18-20; Romans 12:3-6; Acts 6:2-6)

## *Examining Ourselves and Our Congregations*

1. Where do I/we stand on the outreach/nurture scale?
2. Are (Am) we (I) top-heavy in nurture? If so, how can we (I) change that?
3. Without adding anymore programs, how can we incorporate outreach into things we already do?
4. Is a Point Person feasible? What about a part-time lay person?

## **The Home-Plate Advantage**

Leaving outreach in the youth leader's lap is usually inefficient and ineffective. A 1995 Search Institute survey gives us some startling reality about the outreach attitude of youth workers and how they feel they are doing in this area. It revealed that only half of the youth workers surveyed considered outreach "very important" in their ministry. And out of that 50%, only 12% felt that they achieved their outreach goal "very well" (Search Institute, 62). Most training for volunteer leaders (if they had any training) is more focused on youth development and discipleship, not evangelism. It's no wonder many youth workers feel powerless when it comes to instilling outreach in their youth. So powerless, that many don't even try. Simply put, youth workers need help. They need help from the church-at-large, but most of all, they need parents plugged in and involved.

The sad fact, though, is that, "on average, parents spend just 14 minutes a day with their teenagers. Small wonder, then, that 20 percent of teenagers identify 'not enough time with my parents' as a top concern in life" (Group, 12). Teens are receiving minimal contact with their parents, which translates into minimal impact on their lives. The odds of modeling and instilling outreach—or anything for that matter—is stacked against them. We need to pray for our parents and have a heart-to-heart talk with them about getting back into their kids' lives. And quite frankly, not having parents involved is like trying to play baseball with only half a team—we tend to drop the ball!

The myth that youth don't want a relationship with their parents is false. Youth actually crave a relationship with their parents, but their busy lives and their parent's busy lives typically prevent that from happening. And although youth feel that their parents don't understand them, they still do look up to them as very important. "Five thousand high-school students were surveyed by the 1991 *World Almanac*. The students were asked, 'Who is your greatest hero?' Without even being included in the list of choices, 'Mom' came in second, and 'Dad' came in fourth" (Devries, 104). Now that's a powerful statement.

We need to change our teen's lives by first impacting their parent's lives. We need parents to understand what kind of influence they have on their children. And this is crucial, because, "parents play a role second only to that of the Holy Spirit in building the spiritual foundation of their children's lives" (DeVries, 86). This shouldn't be a shock to us. The Bible is clear that "the family is the God-ordained institution for faith-building in children and youth and for the passing of faith from one generation to the next" (Freudenburg, 21). Youth and outreach clearly must begin in the home.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Proverbs 22:6)

### ***Examining Your Impact on Families***

1. What are you doing to empower your parents to teach the faith to their children?
2. Is your congregation overloading the church schedule to add to the already burdensome "family rat race?"
3. Share with the group how you as a congregation have helped parents parent.

## **Major League Rookies**

Well-intentioned people like me have used the phrase many times. "We need to invest in our youth because they are the future of our church." And yes, this is true, but this only paints half of the picture. It gives the impression that youth are only good in the future. In the game of baseball, a recruiter will watch for up-and-coming athletes to try-out for future teams, but our youth are athletes now. They are "running the race" alongside the seasoned veterans. Rookies, yes. In need of grooming, yes. But, we must remember that they too are the present church, and an important part of the team – a gift of God. Jesus never said, "Take up your cross and follow me when you're an adult." His mandate was for everyone. We will do well to encourage our youth in outreach as Paul encouraged the young pastor Timothy in his ministry by saying, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1 Timothy 4:12).

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus wanted to reveal his glory and draw these seekers closer to himself—the Bread of Life. There's no doubt he got his message across. They were truly amazed at what they saw and experienced. I too am amazed at the power of God. But what really strikes me whenever I read this story is not the awesome miracle, but the way Jesus went about it. He could have produced all that food out of nothing. Instead, he chose to use a small boy and his lunch for his purposes. Accepting the challenge, the boy willingly gave up what he had. In the end, God's glory was proclaimed and lost souls were taken care of. He showed how teamwork, even though unneeded in his case, changed lives!

In his infinite wisdom, Jesus wanted to show us how vitally important young people are in the body of Christ. No one is too young or too ill-equipped to be involved in outreach and service. It kind of makes you think doesn't it? If Jesus could use such a young boy for his purposes, couldn't and shouldn't we use the young people in our congregations? The boy may have been small, but he had a giant-sized heart. He gave up his lunch to everyone around him – showing tremendous faith and a love for people. When challenged with an opportunity to help, he gave generously. Young people *do* have a yearning to serve and help God's kingdom grow!

With this in mind, let's empower our youth with God's Word and challenge them to get involved. Let's give them a chance to serve their Savior and use the gifts, talents, and "small lunches" God has blessed them with—no matter how minute they may seem. Let's help them make a difference and make them feel as important as Jesus tells us they are. There's no doubt in my mind that God will use them to do something amazing!

### ***Examining your Congregation's Attitudes About Youth In Outreach***

1. Does your congregation include youth in your outreach events?
2. If so, are there more opportunities?
3. If not, is there an event coming up that you can involve them in?

So far I have given many practical guidelines for involving youth in the outreach of our congregations. We have considered (1) God's call to all Christians (2) a change of mind about outreach in general (3) plugging in the family, (4) and stressing the role of youth in congregational outreach events right now. Now I'd like to share some specific ways parents, pastors, teachers, staff ministers, point persons, and youth ministry leaders can equip youth to share their faith. Some may be new to you and some may not.

**God's Word** – supply and encourage regular use of opportunities to study God's Word

**Prayer** – encourage youth to pray for all their friends, especially their non-Christian ones

**Help Find Outreach Style** – develop program for discovering personal gifts/style (Willow Creek)

**Easy Law/Gospel Presentation** – (Chasm/Cross or God's Great Exchange)

**Business Card Reminders** – prayer reminder list; witnessing steps (to be carried in wallet/bag)

**Business Card Invites** – easy hand-out showing place and times of worship/Bible Study

**(R.A.K.) – Random Acts of Kindness** – Holding doors at mall, Bottled water with church logo handed out to passersby at park, Valentines to shut-ins/nursing homes

**Mission Trips** – create opportunities for them to serve and reach out with leader and peer support

**Service Projects with Family** – encourage families to serve together

**Special Worship Services** – Youth led / Invite friends to “Events”/Audio-Visual

**Lock-Ins (Matthew Parties)** – Inviting non-Christian friends to “rub shoulders” with Christians

**MSN Chats** – Opportunity for non-Christian friends to see Christian conversation (and get in on it if comfortable)

**Fellowship Events** – Snow Tubing, Mini Golf, Bowling, Open Gym, Swimming, Amusement Park, Christian Concerts / Comedy

**Bible Camps / Sport Camp / Egg Hunt / Steel Drum Concert** – Aids and Leaders / Greeters / Prep Work

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