

Laying a foundation for your Student Ministry

John Gerig
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The house we live in was built in 1926. Before we bought it, an inspector came and checked it out. There were many things that had decayed with age, but the most serious was that the foundation on one side was buckling under the weight of the house. Needless to say, fixing the foundation was one of the first and most expensive repairs we made after buying the house.



Just like a house our ministry needs a solid foundation. While we're not talking about bricks and mortar, we are talking about our 'core values.' These are things that we prioritize, that are non-negotiable. Without them, our ministry efforts will fall short.

Youth Ministry specialist, Dan Spader studied the ministry and words of Jesus to identify values that were the foundation for Jesus' ministry. I've adapted these below; they are the kinds of values that can provide a firm foundation for our ministry as well:

1. Knowing Jesus. Jesus spent lots of time explaining who He was: the Messiah sent by God, the Son of God, the Good Shepherd, etc. He even quizzed his disciples on this in Matthew 16:13-20: 'Who do people say that I am?' and 'Who do you say I am?' Helping kids know Jesus and what a relationship with Him looks like should be central for us too. A story is told about one youth worker, who met one of his former students later in life. This person had become a Christian after leaving the group, and he asked the leader, 'We played lots of games, took lots of trips, and discussed many things together in youth group. Why didn't you ever explain who Jesus is?' We can't make that mistake.

2. The Centrality of God's Word. Jesus was constantly quoting God's Word ('It is written...'). When he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, how did he respond? With Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus said He didn't come to replace God's Word, He came to fulfill it. We need to help our kids learn to read God's Word for themselves. We need to study God's Word together with them, reading and helping them apply what it says. The 'Bible 101' lessons on the *Youth Ministry 2:2* website can help you dive into God's Word with your teens. Here is a link to those lessons:

<https://www.youthministry22.com/bible-lessons-2>

3. Prayer. Jesus' life and ministry were bathed in prayer: Jesus prayed at his baptism, before doing miracles, in the wilderness, in the early morning, after a busy day, in the

Garden before being crucified, and on the cross. In Romans (8:34), we learn that He is now with God, praying for us. If Jesus the Son of God needed to pray throughout His ministry, how much more do we? Pray with the kids, with other leaders. I have adult prayer partners praying for my ministry, and I send them monthly requests. My prayer journal lists my kids, some with pictures; I focus on just a few each day. I love this saying: 'When we work, we work; when we pray, God works.'

The first three values are focused upwards, on God. The next three focus outwards, towards each other:

4. An atmosphere of love. Jesus loved his disciples, not just the 12 but all of His followers – and even those who refused to follow Him, like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21). Jesus said that people will know we belong to Christ by our love (John 13:34-35). This is still true today. But how do we show love to our teens? Gary Chapman's five love languages can help us get started:

- Words and notes of encouragement
- Appropriate physical touch
- Acts of help
- Small gifts
- Quality time spent together

Kids often forget what we've taught them, but they will always remember how we treated them. May they remember they were loved.

5. Relationships between kids and with leaders. Jesus spent time eating, traveling, discussing, living life with his disciples. They saw Him 'up close and personal.' His relationships varied by degrees: He had 70-plus disciples, but he called 12 of them to be especially close to him. Out of twelve He called three, Peter, James and John, to become his inner circle. They were invited to the Transfiguration and His struggle in Gethsemane. This did not mean he loved them more, but He understood that relationships deepen with the extra time you can only give to a small number of people. Make every effort to foster good relationships within your group. For teens, 'Who is going to be there?' is more important to them than 'What are we going to do?' A few kids may become especially close to you and if you have a team of leaders, male and female, it's possible that each student will make a deeper connection, even beyond the general sense of acceptance you can offer to everyone.

6. A positive group identity. People wanted to be around Jesus, be a part of what He was doing and told others about Him. No one could say that Jesus' ministry was boring! The last value is that when people look at our student ministry they see something positive. We want others to know something's happening here, it's interesting. This will happen as a result of all the preceding values: God Word is taught and lives are changed; students are connecting to Christ and prayers are being answered. Think of ways you can promote the good things happening within your group. Share pictures, stories and answers to prayer within your group meetings, with your leaders, and with

the church. There was a time when my group was full of eclectic, sort of 'wild' kids, but they always did a great job of accepting new kids and including them into their circle. I pointed this out to them, and others many times.

These six values that Dan Spader saw in Jesus' ministry became the foundation of his *Sonlife Youth Strategy*. I have focused on these six values as the foundation of my own youth ministry for most of my adult life, in both America and Russia.

Think about what you value in your student ministry, the non-negotiables. Discuss them with your leaders. Maybe you want to parallel the values your church has adopted. Your ministry stands on the values you choose. Make sure they are in place, based on God's Word, undergirding your ministry efforts through its inevitable highs and lows.