



The Joy and Dread of Youth Ministry By Art Bamert, Jr.

If you are a youth minister, the week between Christmas and New Year's is full of joy and dread. If you still have at least a little sanity, then this time of year means your schedule is "light" and you have the much sought after time to take a deep breath and relax. Those fifteen minutes are followed by the dread. OK, not real dread like, "oh my, the ceiling is about to cave in", but a unique dread experienced by those of us who have accepted the call to work with teens. Your glorious quarter hour is filled with visions of the crazy march from September to the year's end. You pleasantly sit back and smile in amazement at how you made it through again (or for the first time), the welcome back gatherings, the weekly or biweekly effort to meet with your teens and help them sort through the maze that is life in the 21st century. You squeezed your schedule through a sieve made of football games, band competitions, fall play, work schedules, apathy, unsympathetic parents, forgotten permission slips, last minute additions of youth who swear you never told them about the retreat and more. Forget sugar plums, these are the visions that dance through your weary mind along with countless little things that came and went so fast you forgot most of them. You are a "professional youth minister". If it was easy, everyone would do it, you reassure yourself. Your adult volunteers, if you are lucky enough to still have them, have helped you steer this "ministry" through the "mind field" of parish politics, scheduling faux pas (SINGULAR - what is the plural?) and parishioner disinterest.

You joyfully recall the great discussions of a youth night, the sight of teens praying before the Blessed Sacrament and the new kid, who did not even go to church in September, who is ready to head off to the seminary. Then it happens: The dread. The thought enters your mind, "Is it worth it? Really? Have I really changed any lives? Have we really made a difference or have I just provided a safe, alcohol and drug free place for them to hang out?" Then your mind drifts to the post New Year schedule. The inevitable drift of your flock as basketball starts and the spring musical approaches. The frantic effort to extort money from these young people for work camps and summer conferences that are not even on their radar yet. You know they want to go, but they won't be thinking about that until April. Too late!

Then the worst dread of all. The kid (DO YOU WANT TO USE “KID”?) who you were sure was on the way to living Sainthood. In your heart you screamed Santo Subito, each time you saw them. Their piety and zeal for souls at their school was stuff of legend. Each week they would come to youth night and regale the gathered flock with their wonderful evangelistic efforts. You sat in awe, a little ashamed that you are not that bold with your peers. You can clearly see the hoards of kids who are involved in your ministry due to that one holy soul. And you the proud youth minister. Good job faithful servant. Your recall all of this as you remember years past when this kid turned and went the other way. Your dread increases as you recall this kid, arrested at a party. Kicked out of school for fighting. The new girlfriend or boyfriend is just more real than Jesus or other similar reasoning. Or just as distressing, they just gave up on the faith. Tired, game over, just too much work. “I want to have fun, “ they announce. I don’t want to be picked on anymore. Made fun of. God will understand.

Your heart sinks at the thought of that kid. You know there may be more. No, will be more. Is it worth it? The dread of this can be overwhelming. You put so much of yourself into your ministry. Your time, energy and talents. You give up so much. Family dinners at home on Sunday night, evenings at home with your family, countless (NOT COUNTESS!) hours spent at council meetings, presentations to the PTA and the s(SMALL S)chool board. So much time. And for what?

If you have been a youth minister for more that six months this scenario is not foreign to you.

After 10 years in ministry and 20 working with youth, I have been there. But it is at this time of year, when we slow down just enough to see what we have been doing and what is happening all around us that we can take stock of what we do and put it into perspective. These are not our kids and it is not our ministry. They belong to God. We are here to do what we can. When we get hung up on our successes and failures we focus on our limited abilities. We place our expectations on the people we work with.

This is the time of year that we focus on the Incarnation. Jesus was born a child into a family. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He came as our savior, to offer us salvation. We, as youth ministers, are charged with helping to bring young people to a relationship with Christ, but ultimately it is God’s grace and their free that will determine the outcome. We plant seeds. We plant them in the cold winter. We nurture and pray and offer our lives as an example of holiness - maybe the only example they see.

The only reward we should seek is the gift of grace to love God more. If we work expecting to see all the fruits of our labor then we may end up in that place of dread. That is the place where Satan wants us. Broken and unsure. Christ came and was rejected by many of his own. His home town tried to do him in. One of his own betrayed him. The leaders of his people had him killed. We reject Him each time we sin.

Don’t be so hard on yourself and on the teens you minister to. Pray even more

in this new year that you would be filled with a sense of hope. A feeling of awe at the goodness and penitence of God. We are youth ministers. We have the best job in the world. Let it fill you with joy, not dread. OK, a little dread is acceptable, we are human after all.

I 'll leave you with the words my pastor and former boss uttered so often when he would encounter me as I went about my work. I still smile at the thought of them. "Remember young man, discouragement is the devil's greatest weapon".

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