

ORGANIC
STUDENT
MINISTRY

TRASH THE PRE-PACKAGED PROGRAMS
AND TRANSFORM YOUR YOUTH GROUP

STEPHEN INGRAM



CHALICE
P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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The Crisis of Fast-Food Ministry



In the past 30 years, student ministry has become solidified in the establishment of ecclesial life in the American church. In this solidification and subsequent recognition, much effort, scholarship, and pragmatic study have been given to better reaching, impacting and growing student ministries. While much good has come from all of this attention, the professionalization process has brought with it a number of detrimental habits and tendencies that show up in far too many youth ministries today.

It has happened in much the same way the fast food industry has been detrimental to the health of our nation. When it is popular, cheaper, faster, easier, and so readily available, it can become our default. The same trend has happened in our student ministries.

This has played itself out most prevalently in the practice of “adopt and drop.” Adopt and drop is a consumer-based pattern in which we student ministers adopt the latest trend, book, or pragmatic approach and drop it into our student ministries.

What happens is that we naively expect the new ideas to “work” without considering the specific context, tone, needs, abilities, and natural gifts that already exist in our churches. This pattern produces identity confusion, anxiety, frustration, and ultimately a student ministry that lacks coherence and sustainability.

So often youth ministers inadvertently try to “plant palm trees in Antarctica.” When we take some model of student ministry that has “proven” successful and try to implement it in our context, we may or may not see success. The model may be good, even great. The problem is that just because it works in southern California does not mean it is going to work in southern Indiana. Alas, time and time again we adopt these systems and structures and drop them into our contexts with little adaptation and little regard to whether they match who we are and what we are called and equipped to do.

Organic student ministry is not a program developed in a vacuum. It is, however, an approach to student ministry that worries less about giving the right answers and more about helping you ask the right questions. The only way you can help lead a student ministry toward and into fruitful ministry is to help it grow where it is planted. In order to do this you have to know a lot more than student ministry tips and tricks. You have to dig deep in the history, the passion, the DNA, and the people of the student ministry and church. You have to create better, yet unearth and cultivate the natural ministry that the church was made to do. You have to understand yourself as the curator of this great treasure, constantly helping it speak for itself and become more of who it was created to be. Inside of these questions and this investigation, you get to bring your unique talents and gifts to enhance the ministry of the church while finding fulfillment in your own calling. This sort of ministry does not depend on you and does not revolve around you.

By most accounts, the average life of a youth minister is 18–24 months and then on to the next church. What happens is that the youth minister and the church so often join in exploitative relationships, in which each other’s resources (mental, spatial, creative, financial, emotional, and temporal) are exploited by the other until these resources are drained.

Then burn-out begins. I should not have to elaborate on this because, if you have been in ministry any amount of time, you know exactly what I am talking about.

There *is* hope; there *is* another way.

After 17 years in student ministry, I cannot tell you how amazing it is to lead a ministry that is so deeply rooted in the students, parents, volunteers, and the whole church. It is amazing because I know that I am joining with and enhancing the ministry that the church is called to, and not the ministry that I want to import to the community.

By living into this model, I get to walk into work each day not feeling the weight or the anxiety of the ministry on my shoulders. I get to walk into a co-op of volunteers, clergy, staff, parents, and students as one part, one piece of the greater good of the student ministry. The weight is evenly distributed and so are the joys, the triumphs, and the celebrations.

You cannot do this sort of ministry if you are selfish. If you need your youth ministry as a confidence-builder or a glory machine, then you do not need to read any further. This is a ministry model based on generosity, trust, and community. There are places for you to shine in ministry, but not as a shooting star. In this model of ministry, you do get to be a star—but one that is a part of a greater constellation.

I can promise you this is the right kind of student ministry. It is good. And it lasts.

Yesterday was a crazy day for me and the church I serve. We had a huge junior high youth retreat, full of junior-high and senior-high small group leaders, staff, and adult volunteers. It was great. But we had to end it early. We actually ended the retreat two hours early and, at the time that we should have been on the road, I found myself in a room, sitting beside seven of the adult leaders who were on the retreat. We were at the funeral of their youth minister. Our dear friend, Leon, had passed away just a few days earlier, and we changed the schedule of the retreat at the last minute to be able to be back for his memorial service. In my mind there was no question about making this change; over half of my leaders grew up in this man's youth group. We sat in our traditional sanctuary

surrounded by suits, dresses, and ties. We sat there in our long-sleeve retreat t-shirts from that weekend. We did not have time to change, and to be honest Leon would not have wanted us to. We sat and we listened to story after story from the pulpit of how important and beloved this man was and is. I sat with this group of adults wearing our retreat t-shirts realizing, in a way that I never have before, just how much youth ministry matters. I was sitting in the middle of the proof of this man's legacy. Youth group was so important to these adults that they now give their gifts to the youth of the church.

Youth ministry, good youth ministry, has very little to do with youth. If our focus is on youth, then we have missed the point. We are in the business of creating, preparing, and discipling adults. Most of them are not adults yet, but that has to be our focus. We cannot be about the business of creating a generation of youth group junkies. We have to disciple them and do the long, tough, arduous, and sometimes unsatisfying work of youth ministry that lasts. No more gimmicks, no more hype, no more filler—just the good, honest work of love and grace.

My friend and incredible youth volunteer Scott (he has four girls and is a successful businessman) sat beside me in his retreat shirt and leaned over to me before the service. "I'm not sure I'll be able to make it through the funeral of my youth minister while sitting beside my daughter's youth minister."

But he made it and it was beautiful.

What each of us realized in our own way is that our dear friend Leon is not dead. He lives. He lives among us in our conversations, our faith, and our memories. He lives, and was sitting in that room—in shirts from a retreat that he never went on.

Leon stopped being the youth minister at that church when I was eight years old, and he moved to another part of the state, but I benefit from his youth ministry even today. He lives through his youth, their service, and their commitment.

Organic youth ministry is not about youth. Organic youth ministry is about what happens long after they are young, long after they are out of their parents' homes, and long after they go on a retreat. Organic youth ministry is not something that

is quick and flashy. Organic youth ministry lasts long after you have left the church, or, as in the case of Leon, even after you have left this earth.

Simply put, it is an approach that is not bound by region or denomination, by church size or experience. It is an approach that you can turn to in your first years of ministry and your last. I can say this because it is an approach that builds upon what is already naturally occurring and grows because it is customized for each ministry context it is planted in. Organic student ministry takes more time and effort, but in return will create long-term ministry that creates disciples, empowers adults, and lets you plant beautiful and creative ministry that will flourish for years to come.

I

Grafting In



You are 23, fresh out of college and ready to prove who you are and what you can do. You have fresh new ideas and energy, and have not been jaded by the gauntlet of church ministry. You are young and are poised to do amazing things in this church.

You are 52; you are one of the ones who has stuck it out; you have proven yourself and are moving for hopefully the last time. Your experience, maturity, and knowledge let others know that this is not your first rodeo.

You have a full-time job. It is not vocational ministry. It is not even in the church. But you felt a call, saw a need, was coerced into leading a month-long Bible study that is now a part-time job in youth ministry. You have no clue what to do, what to teach, or how to answer a lot of the questions, and are truthfully wondering how you even got to this job (that is *not* your job) anyway?!?!)

That is where the differences end—and each of you step into that office, ready to do good, impact teenagers, and build an amazing ministry.

Then it happens.

You realize either on your own or through a rough brush with ministry reality that you did not inherit a blank slate ministry with which to create your ministry masterpiece on. You *did* inherit a broken, usually hurting, dysfunctional mess teeming with emotions, agendas, and passions. And if this was not enough of an adventure, this is only a small glimpse of the bigger mess the student ministry is both causing and shouldering from the church, the local community, and the students' relationships with God.

Any attempt to insert your agenda will likely end in one of two ways:

1. Restlessness from the natives: “This is not how [*your predecessor's name*] did it!”
2. Unhealthy dependence on you: your ideas, direction, method, etc. The operative word is *YOU*, which means *YOU* are responsible, which means *YOU* will succeed or fail by *your* own effort.

Suddenly, your exciting new ministry's “new car smell” takes on a distinctly sour aroma—a mix of old Doritos and something you are sure was tracked in on the bottom of your shoe.

Lucky you!

After a few more months of uncomfortable run-ins and a couple of angry e-mails, you could be pulling out the old resume, prepping the spouse, and beginning to search the job databases again. Or, if you are a volunteer, you could slowly fade into the background of the church or leave entirely.

But, wait... Pause and rewind.

What if you started with a patient, organic approach?

A Better Way

Some of the worst mistakes a youth minister makes are in the first few months on the job. Why, you might ask? What you do in the first year sets the tone and trajectory for the years to

come. You might not hear the grumbling in the first months or even the first year, not because you have necessarily started well, but because people do not want to challenge the new girl or guy.

A lot of times we come into a new program and do one of two things: we either completely uproot the current system, install our regime, and work our ministry, or we come in and practice the whole “Do not touch anything for the first year” philosophy. We are either extremely hands on or completely hands off. We are either Machiavellian, where resistance is futile, or we are like my two-year-old with Play-Doh, where the unique shades of ministry that we bring are soon so smashed together with the church that both turn into an indistinguishable blob.

Machiavelli and Play-Doh

You remember Machiavelli, right? He was the guy that wrote *The Prince*, which was a book about the art of war and ruling with an iron fist. I will never forget the first time I read this book and was thinking to myself, “Wow, I know some pastors who seem to take their cues from Machiavelli more than from Jesus.” There are some approaches to youth ministry that are very similar. While it may not be a conversion-by-sword sort of approach, there are many youth ministers who do adopt the my-way-or-the-highway mentality when it comes to instituting programming, vision, and mission. This approach comes in with an understanding that the youth ministry needs a new vision, mission, and a general overhaul of the program, and we are the ones they hired to do it. So we come in, institute new language, approaches, formats, worship styles, mission focus, etc. The list can go on and on.

Here are two stories that highlight the dangers of this approach. One involves very aggressive behavior, and one is much more subtle, but both lead to catastrophic results. Story number one. New youth minister hired. Everyone was very excited, they had just come off a very rough situation where they previous leader had been involved in some scandal and they were ready for a new start. So the first night, literally after the youth minister had been there less than 48 hours, he stood up and proclaimed the new vision for the youth ministry, complete with new mission statement and of course

new logo. The guy had been there for 48 hours!!! Needless to say they freaked out. He had not even shared a meal with the kids yet and he was already telling them who they were and what their focus should be. They almost ran him out of the church that night.

Story number two. She was a successful youth minister and had done really good ministry at her previous two churches. It was a good transition in, and she was learning families' names and was planning a lot of relational time with students and parents. Everything was going great until the pink sofa incident. The pink sofa was ugly. Seriously, it was hideous. Anyone in their right mind would immediately burn this thing because, every time you looked at it, it burned your retinas. She thought, "It is probably some whim purchase that then turned into a "I bet the youth group would take this as a tax write-off donation." So she moved it. She found out where the storage closet was for those sorts of items, and she moved it in one Saturday morning. Then the "pink sofa apocalypse" happened. "Where did it go?" "Who moved the pink sofa?" "This is serious; I am mad." At first, she thought they were playing with her, a sort of "let's break in the new girl" treatment. Nope. They became more and more irate and refused to start Sunday school until someone answered for their crimes. So after about 20 minutes she gave up. "I just thought it was ugly and did not match the rest of the youth room—which is impeccably decorated, by the way—so I thought I would move it." They almost ran her out of that church as well.

It turns out that, in both instances, one intentional and the other unintentional, these two youth ministers dramatically disturbed the homeostasis of the ministries they came to help. Both, with the best intentions at heart, made the fatal flaw of approaching their respective ministries with a Machiavelli-like lens and subsequently started off their ministries with these churches on very shaky ground.

The other side of the coin is the Play-Doh approach. The Play-Doh approach is much less aggressive, but just as damaging. Here's another story. Michelle, a gifted young woman started her first youth ministry job. Although it was her first job in youth

ministry, it was certainly not her first professional experience. She had spent the past six years as a professional systems crisis counselor. Her job was to go into and work with businesses that were having personnel problems and help them resolve the problems in an amicable manner while at the same time creating better systems that, if followed, would help alleviate and prevent crises in the future.

Crazy enough, she felt a calling into youth ministry and jumped into it, leading youth part time while keeping her other job. The church she began to work with was one she had been worshiping with and she was very excited about the opportunity. This church, like many others, had had its fair share of crises over the past ten years, some of which Michelle had been made aware of before she took the job. While the turmoil was not overwhelming, it was definitely affecting the ministries. When Michelle was hired, she tried to fly low. Although she knew that she had skills and experience that could be very useful with the turmoil and confusion, she continued to not insert herself into the unhealthy systems that were eating at her church. She simply melded herself into the church, kept a low profile, and watched the systems continue to produce very unhealthy fruit. Her unique gifts went unnoticed, unused, and were consequently unhelpful. She became indistinguishable. Her unique abilities never showed through, and she began to feel like Play-Doh in a child's hands.

Let me pause here and distinguish between becoming Play-Doh and becoming part of a community. In community, you do adopt similar practices and traits. It does not mean that you become indistinguishable. When you become a part of a community, you do not lose the things that make you you. You add things that keep you identifiable, unique, and wholly distinct. Think of a salad: tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, etc. If you just throw these in a bowl, they are a lot of individual parts. But together, with or without dressing, they become a salad. You do not put everything into a blender so that all the items are turned into an indistinguishable puree; that would be gross and not a salad. Each part is still distinguishable, but together they make a salad..

A Third Way: The Way of St. Patrick

There is another way. There is an alternative to either “conquering and assimilating” or “becoming an indistinguishable gelatinous blob” in ministry. It is the way of St. Patrick. St. Patrick lived around 1600 years ago and, believe it or not, provided a pretty incredible model for how to peacefully move into a church community and at the same time maintain your gifts, personality, and integrity.

In order to understand this technique, you first have to understand Patrick’s backstory. According to *The Confession of St. Patrick*, Patrick, as a 16-year-old, was abducted from his homeland of Great Britain and taken as a slave to Ireland. He was there for six years, until he escaped and fled back to Great Britain. He followed a call into the ministry and spent the following years studying theology and becoming ordained as a priest.

Upon the completion of his training, he was sent back to Ireland. Patrick had a couple of options at this point. He could have gone in with dogged determination to eradicate anything that did not fit into his belief structure and practice, or he could go in and adhere to the already established norms of Christianity.

He chose neither.

Neither made sense.

He was not going to go in and completely destroy their way of life and demand that they convert to his understanding of the faith. At the same time, he knew that they needed something else, something more than what they were currently experiencing.

So he chose a third way.

One of the things that makes Patrick unique is he chose to help the people of Ireland, both pagan and Christian, understand the faith in their own terms, using their own symbols and practices, and even their own holy days. The predominant religious group, the druids, had beliefs, practices, and holy days that were not only central to their way of life but also reflected the way of life of the people of Ireland. Patrick

had experienced the way of life, customs, and rituals of the druids as a prisoner for six years, so he knew them well. They were not just a group of pagans who, as it would have seemed to an outsider, worshiped the sun and burned sacrificial piles of wood. He knew that these were devoted people, people who believed in what they did and were children of the living God.

Patrick did not look at them as people below himself or as people whom he would “set straight,” saving them from their religious folly. He first sought to understand them, to know them, and live among them. Patrick lived in a tension that is not foreign to many youth ministers. He knew if he completely assimilated into the culture then he would never be able to make a difference in it. At the same time, he also knew there would be a time when the principles of his faith and the practices of the druids would collide. He knew when that time came he would have to be ready, he would have to be trusted, and he would have to make a strong yet calibrated move to show that the God he served was different from the deities of the druids.

So, what’s a saint to do?

In life and ministry, there are some things you’ll recognize and feel at home with, and others that seem blatant contradictions to the way you believe God is calling both you and the church.

So what do you do?

Do you uproot everything to plant something new? Or do you do nothing and hope it works out for the best? Either one could have you looking for another new job in 9–12 months.

Listening and Responding

First, listen and observe. You are not a deity. You do not have all of the answers and you are not the savior of the world or even this church. While you do have a lot to bring to this church, the church also has a lot to teach you. Seriously, even the most messed up churches have something to teach each of us. Sometimes they teach us by helping us learn what not to do, but no matter what we can still learn from them.

Listening requires less talking. For many of us this can be one of the hardest parts of this job. Listen for their fears. They

are fearful, at least in some part. They want to be better, they want to do something more, but at best are fearful of their own inefficiencies, failures, and their own pasts. Also, listen for their dreams. I will guarantee you that they have dreams; you might have to mine them out, but they are there. If it seems like there are a lack of dreams, it might even be that you have to help them remember that they are allowed to dream. I experience this with a lot of churches. They have not only forgotten their dreams but many have forgotten how to dream.

Now, you might be thinking, “Well, Stephen, why don’t you ask them about who they are, their programs, their current leadership, what has been working well, etc.?” You could do that, but usually you are going to get some stylized, sanitized understanding of self that reflects more of who they think they should be or, even worse, more reflective of who they think you want them to be. That is not what we are after; those responses only reflect what they believe is expected, not necessarily who they have been created to be as the church. When you ask for and listen to dreams and fears, you move past the shell of what should be and into the core of what could be. It is in our dreams and fears, these more primal of places, that we find the best hope for what God can do in the life of a congregation as well as in the life of an individual.

As you listen, take notes and look for themes and patterns. They are there, they just have to be recognized and brought to the surface. These patterns will tell you not only where they have been but where they are feeling called to go. You will become the holder of this collective dream and the custodian of its preservation and, ultimately, its birth.

You have a unique place and ability to do this. Not only are you new, so you’re impartial, but you also have a clearer slate to hear these true and vulnerable hopes.

These are your treasures. Guard them as such.

Sort

Not everything you hear will have equal value. You have to make some judgment calls. Don’t make the mistake of believing that everything you hear is something you have to enact. There

will be both fears and dreams that will rise to the surface to focus on. Sort, prioritize, and reflect back to the people of the congregation what you have learned.

This does a few things. The first is that it shows that you have listened to them. Few things will go further in your ministry than when people know they have been listened to. Second, it will give them a common purpose and some commonly understood baselines from which to work. Last, it gives the people in your congregation something to work on and with, together.

The best functioning churches and the best functioning youth ministries are the ones that have some common goals, purposes, and projects to work on and with together. This is a great gift you can give them.

Align

This is when you and your gift sets finally come into the picture. At six to nine months into your position, this is the first time you should begin to assert yourself in your position as leader of the ministry. This is where you get to align your gifts, strengths, and passions with the ministry that has been defined by the congregation, parents, and youth.

Look at the priorities that have been defined and ask yourself, “Where do I fit in?” This should not be a one-time question that you ask in your ministry. It must be the question that you ask again and again. It is so important to remember that the ministry you are doing is not “your” ministry and the church is not “your” church. The ministry that you get to lead is a ministry that you have been entrusted to take care of, curate, and maximize. It is the ministry of God through this particular part of the church.

The most common problem many youth ministers and clergy have is that they align the church to their mission instead of the other way around. Remember these two simple and humbling facts: they asked you to join them and, long after you are gone, they will still be there. Let this encourage you that the complete responsibility for the success of this ministry does not fall upon you. You are a piece in the wonderful puzzle that’s emerging.

Refine

After you have aligned your gifts, passions, and self to the ministry your church is being called to, you must look for gaps in that ministry. While the process of listening and observing will give you a great picture of the future of the ministry of the church, it will have some holes. None of us as individuals are completely self-aware, and the same rule also applies to the church. As you look over the landscape of ministry you should now be looking for two things: (1) Where are the gaps? and (2) Where is the overgrowth?

First, the gaps. I was consulting with a church a few years ago and we were doing a time of visioning and mission setting. It was a great process and, as we came around to the end of the brainstorming of the goals and mission, everyone was very excited, pleased, and feeling really good about the impressive list of future possibilities. I felt good about them too: Bible studies, new facilities, trips, parent involvement, discipleship, etc.

That is, I did feel good until I went back to my hotel that night and began looking over the list from a 30,000-foot view. As I considered the topics on the list I noticed one glaring thing: there was no mention of mission or outreach—not one soup kitchen, no homeless shelter, no blanket drives, and no mission trips. Nothing. This is problematic in itself. It is even more problematic as one of the primary words in the church's mission statement was "serve."

When I went back the next day, I told the group that we had a problem. After going through their goals and pointing out the massive gap, they were mortified. We quickly jumped back into brainstorming and rectified the problem. We came out with some outstanding ideas for how they could better reach out to their community and "the least of these."

The problem is clear. If I hadn't gone back and looked at it from an objective point of view, we might have missed this incredibly important piece of ministry. In this process you will have to step back at times all along the way and continually ask yourself, *Where are the holes? Where are there gaps in this ministry?*

Next, the overgrowth. Churches are bad, I mean really bad, at cutting overgrowth.

"That is who we are!"

"It would not be [enter name of church] if we did not do that program!"

"We have always done it that way."

This last one is maybe the most dreadful of the most common phrases that keep churches and youth ministries from cutting or refining programs that no longer align with the mission or values of the ministry. Ministries are notorious for keeping programs alive because of what they *were*, and not because of what they currently are. You will not only have to look for and recognize the gaps in the ministry but you will also have to look for the overgrowth that will choke out new growth. (We will explore this more in the next chapter on "weeds" and "wildflowers.")

Activate

Finally comes that time to do something. I know it seems like a long time coming, but you have finally laid the groundwork to do the ministry of the church, *not* the ministry of the minister. For many people this is the most difficult part of the plan. It is the most difficult because this is where we go beyond the theoretical, the meetings, the dreaming, and the talk, and into the hard work, sweat, and time. As you get ready to activate your new mission and vision, there are two major pitfalls to avoid.

Analysis Paralysis

This is not a term I coined. I'm not sure where it came from, but it is one of the biggest contributors to atrophy in the beginning phases of new ministries.

People want a plan. This is good. People want a good plan. This is even better. But when people want a perfect plan, this is insanity. There are no perfect plans. Trust me. There are only plans that continually move toward or away from perfection, failing or succeeding toward greater excellence.

Your plan, no matter how hard you work, pray, and analyze, will not be perfect. Release yourself and your plan from this unrealistic expectation. It is so easy for a vision or plan to become trapped in the deadly cycle of analysis. At some point you will have to simply activate and begin the healthy process of trying, failing, adjusting, and retrying.

Part of doing this well is setting everyone up with the same expectations. Make sure that everyone knows that everything we do falls into this process and that each time we fail and adjust we become better and more aligned with the mission that God is calling us to.

Wait for Growth

I know it seems like a lot of work, and it is. It would be a lot easier to just come in and spend time with youth and parents, do some good activities, lead Bible studies, and see where it goes. It could go really well! It could also go really poorly. You do still need to do the Bible studies, the games, the relationships, and all of those other things that were the reasons you probably got into youth ministry. Those are good and great things. There is also this other side, though. There is the side of ministry that plans not only for next week but for the next generation. You want to be at a church for a long time, trust me. You want to see your sixth graders through graduation and beyond. You want to be able to look back over a long line of relationships, successes, and even failures. Longevity is not a bonus in youth ministry; it is becoming more and more apparent that it is a necessity. Starting well in student ministry is one of the only ways to do this. A ministry that is developed as a culmination of the partnership between the youth minister, the volunteers, the parents and the whole church will always be so much better than anything that you or I could do by ourselves.

2

Distinguishing the Wildflowers from the Weeds



There are a hundred incarnations of the old saying, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” While each of these sayings are contextualized, they all have the central message: “What you consider valuable is all about perspective.” I will add my contextualized voice to the myriad that have preceded it by coining “One person’s weeds are another person’s wildflowers.”

Okay, that is sort of a lie. I thought I made that up until I did a search of the phrase and saw that Susan Wittig Albert coined it in her 2003 work *An Unthymely Death and Other Garden Mysteries*. While that is neither here nor there, I want to give credit where credit is due.

My what-I-thought-to-be original saying came to me in the long, hot, dog days of a Southern summer in 2006.

I have always had a sort of love/hate relationship with grass.

When it is bright green, perfectly cut, and free of weeds, the love abounds. The rest of the time (usually 98 percent of the time) I find myself in the constant battle of cutting,

aerating, feeding, watering, and weeding, hoping for that beautiful, naturally lush carpet of green goodness. In the southeastern U.S., one of the primary enemy combatants in the “battle of the grass” is the evil prickly Sow Thistle. I know plants cannot be evil, so it might seem a little dramatic, but, seriously, this robust, indignant, sturdy weed was the bane of my backyard. It would not only grow fast, it would grow tall. If I were busy for a few weeks and not able to take care of that area of the yard, that stuff would take up residence—and in an impressive way.

There was one instance of Sow Thistle I remember particularly well. It grew just outside our bedroom window and at the perfect angle so every morning when I woke up, it would raise its spiny head to the edge of the window and stare at me taunting me. It had a look to say, “I’m here, still here, and I am not going away, sucker.”

I really hated this weed.

Then something happened.

I came home one afternoon and my wife told me she had finished a new painting. Of course, I told her I could not wait to see it and I followed her to her art desk—and there it was: the evil Sow Thistle stood there, in careful brushstrokes, staring at me. The Sow Thistle had wooed my wife and was now in my home.

I don’t advise using my first reaction, especially if the painter’s your wife: “Why in the world would you paint a weed? I hate weeds.”

In her generous way (one she has developed masterfully after being married to me for so many years), she responded, “I think it’s nice. I like it, so I painted it. It is not a weed; it is a wildflower and I think it’s pretty.” I took a step back and, in a moment, I forgot my tumultuous history with said weed and saw it in an entirely new light. She was right. There were purples and deep greens, yellow flowers that looked like dandelions, and thousands upon thousands of these paper-thin translucent needles reaching out in every direction. It was strong yet delicate, intimidating yet inviting. Magically, my perspective shifted. I now saw *both* sides of the Sow

Thistle. It was nuisance or beauty or both, depending on one's perspective.

In youth ministry there are a lot of these weed/wildflower conundrums. There will always be those situations, programs, events, and ministries of which we have to ask those discerning questions. When we inherit a ministry, and all ministries are inherited, we receive treasures, traps, and a whole lot of weedy wildflowers.

The tension we will consistently find ourselves in is how to determine what parts of the ministry are weeds, which are wildflowers, and how to deal with both once we determine what they are.

No matter how we go about this, the moral of the story is that many of these things we will talk about are *both* weeds and wildflowers. Part of our discernment is realizing that so much depends on perspective and context, neither of which will we always know right away.

Ripping Out Wildflowers

I could share many stories in which I have seen others, and myself for that matter, tear out beds of wildflowers, mistaking them for weeds. However, one stands out in particular.

I knew this guy who had moved to his dream church. This church was one of those great situations in which he and the church seemed to be a perfect fit. He had been working at the church for about three months when he decided some changes needed to be made. This church had a long tradition of really meaningful small groups that not only developed excellent community but also helped this fairly large church feel smaller. The new guy had worked at churches where small groups were important and were a central part of the DNA; this is yet another reason why it seemed to be a perfect fit for the youth minister and the church.

The only problem is that the youth minister had done small groups in a different way than the way the church had set up. The youth minister was used to having more control of the content, set up, and organization of the small groups. The groups at the church formed more naturally, usually around

friends. The new youth minister wanted to change this system. Not only did he not feel comfortable with the system in place, he also did not know how to manage it.

So at first he began to try to assert more control over the groups and began adding more structures and oversight to the groups. While I am usually very much for these sorts of system overhauls, it was obvious that it was coming across heavy-handed and the groups began to resent his involvement. Soon it became evident that their groups were not going to fall in line with the new systems. The new youth minister became more and more frustrated that they were not following his leadership, until one day about eight months into his new job he announced that the youth group would no longer have small groups and that they had become somewhat of an idol for the group.

Needless to say, this did not sit well with the youth and parents of the congregation. About six months later, just over a year into the job, the new youth minister left. He had lost the trust, respect, and following of his group.

Do not rip out wildflowers mistaking them for weeds. Just because it feels like a nuisance to you does not mean that you should—or even have the right to—eliminate it.

While keeping that warning in the forefront of your mind I want to also acknowledge that there are weeds in every ministry. There are those programs, traditions, and even leaders that are deeply rooted and detrimental to the overarching vision and execution of the ministry. Here are three questions to ask to determine what are the wildflowers or weeds growing in your ministry.

Codependency or Healthy Co-beneficial Relationships?

Unfortunately, some people, at some times, can be weeds. In unhealthy circumstances they can be weeds to a ministry. One of the most prevalent ways is when they are codependent with the ministry or students.

Codependency happens when people try to meet their emotional and psychological needs through the ministry or in their relationships. This is a good place for some self-evaluation.

I was working with a church several years ago that had a guys ministry. At least, that's what it seemed to be from the outside. These guys would get together once a week in a few groups and would just pour their hearts out to one another. There were tears, deep sharing, and a very strong sense of community. That is, until a new youth minister tried to probe a little deeper and bring them under the vision and authority of the church. Almost immediately the leader resisted. The guys would stop coming, he said. They would no longer feel safe and their needs would no longer be met. The unreasonably strong response caused us to dig deeper, at which point, two things became evident.

The leader had an unhealthy attachment to the dynamic of the group, and most of the guys were coming out of a sense of obligation to this leader, to support him and to be faithful to him. Again, if you looked at the attendance and satisfaction level, you would think this was a healthy ministry. But below the surface was a toxicity that was engrained and growing.

The opposite is a ministry that is co-beneficial, in which both the leaders and the participants can be ministered to and minister within. I have a volunteer who is an excellent example of this. He has a calling to minister with students. It is not a need, it is a calling that his life be shared with the students in our ministry. He is not emotionally dependent; his well-being is not based on the well-being of the students. He has the ability to be in those tough situations with students and at the same time to rise above those situations—not being sucked into their immediate problems, but able to see their lives with perspective and provide hope. Codependents cannot function this way. In codependent relationships, participants become enmeshed and feed off each others' feelings. They cannot rise above circumstances and are unable to find perspective that leads to hope. If you find yourself or your leaders unable to achieve perspective apart from your students' situations, or you or your leaders feel caught up emotionally in the situations and problems of your students, take a step back. Empathy *is* good and, for students who are hurting, it is vital. However, what often happens is an adult begins to develop a need to be the

“savior” for the students. Instead of being an objective agent of healing, some adults unknowingly use a relationship to feel better about themselves. This is selfish, wrong, and dangerous.

There is a world of difference between standing in the gap for someone and wallowing in the mud with them—and it all comes down to motive. If you know of or are in unhealthy relationships, you need to recognize any selfish purposes and establish a firm line in place of the one that has become blurred.

Spend any time at all in ministry and you will have to deal with this weed. It’s inevitable. People are human and codependency is in every church.

Does It Overtake and Prevent Other Growth?

One of the most damaging things about weeds is that they overtake and root out other plants around them. They stress and deplete resources, time, and energy at rates that are harmful and irresponsible to the growth around them. The same thing happens in ministries. Most youth ministries—and churches for that matter—have at least one of their programs that sucks the life, resources, and energy from the rest of the ministry. They are usually run by a dedicated leader, who is often the founder of that program or has a close emotional tie to it. For them it *is* the ministry. Sometimes it is a fundraiser; other times it is a trip or a mission project. The problem is not the program or ministry itself. In other contexts it might function very well and even become the healthy centerpiece of that ministry. The problem comes when its existence and perpetuation becomes detrimental and even harmful to the overarching goals and vision of the ministry in which it exists. If other ministries have to function in spite of it, you might have a problem.

An example is a fundraiser that I witnessed at a church one time. It was designed to help the youth ministry raise funds for their annual mission trip. In its early days it was incredibly beneficial. It did its job and brought energy to the group and the congregation. Soon its success became overwhelming. The fundraiser became more and more complicated, needing more and more people and more and more resources. Soon it was taking up massive slots on the calendar and was ultimately

wearing everyone out, including the beneficiaries of the funds. It was no longer functioning as it should and had become a beast in and of itself that, like the plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*, had an insatiable appetite, constantly begging the church for one more bite.

In our best-case scenarios each of our ministries function alongside each other in mutually beneficial ways. When these are at their best they are united by a common mission and goal. They each, in their own way, seek to help the ministry achieve that overarching goal as well as complement each other.

Have you even seen a cornfield? If you have you will notice just how close the stalks are planted together; it is amazing just how many are on a single row. The reason farmers do this is because each stalk needs other stalks close so that they can cross-pollinate. They do not push each other out. They actually help each other and grow because of what the other does. In our best incarnations, our programs and ministries should work in the same ways.

Complementary Crops or Single-Focus Landscaping?

It is good to know who you are, what you are good at, and the unique niche you are called to fill in the greater scope of Christianity. Too often the problem comes when we find ourselves only being one type of church or group and completely neglecting the other pieces of the faith that we are called to live and strengthen.

We see it all of the time. The youth group is all about worship music and will sing for hours, but rarely will you see them taking care of the poor. Another group is all about deep study, learning about and working on the major social ills of its community, yet they will rarely if ever talk about the Jesus who calls them to do these things. Still others will focus on getting as many kids through the doors of the church, but will end up rarely giving them anything substantive enough to provide the growth to become dedicated disciples of Jesus.

All churches do it. All groups do it. Granted, it is to varying degrees, but this is something we are all guilty of. The best groups are aware of this and are constantly pushing themselves to make sure there is growth and sustainability in ways that are not their

default sweet spots of ministry. None of us are called to have a single, solitary focus. We cannot show the world our God by only giving them a solitary glimpse at one of God's attributes.

If you are a group that has nine Bible studies a week and one time of serving others a month, you might want to rethink your programming. If you are spending loads of your time and budget on your worship time, but do not live out or understand worship as something that we have the opportunity to do with our whole lives, music or not, you might want to reevaluate your allotments. If you are the group that is so serious all of the time with study and thought that you forget to have fun and be a community of joy, you might want to take a deep breath and rediscover the other aspects that tie your community together.

This does not mean that if you are a group that finds a lot of its identity around worship that you should stop or even cut it dramatically. It just means that you also have to make sure that your students understand that singing in a service is not the central mark of their faith. We as caretakers of these students must expose them to a broad array of practices and incarnations of the faith that will help them know that God and the whole of the Christian faith is much bigger than whatever it is that we tend to focus on the most. Just remember that even our most dominant "plant," the one that grows most naturally in our church's soil, can at times become problematic and even act as a weed when it goes unmanaged and is not properly balanced.

Is it a weed or a wildflower? Is it harmfully spreading or merely growing at incredible rates? Is it healthy ministry or a problem to be dealt with? None of these are questions with easy, clean-cut answers. There are always anomalies and exceptions. There are always instances in which the lines are more blurred than definitive. No matter what decisions we make about the programs and ministries that these questions are asked of, we must remember to prune and cultivate with care and compassion.

These programs and ministries mean something to someone or else they would probably not be there. Contrary to the analogies in this book, ministry is not as easy as a garden. It

is complicated and has way more intertwined roots below the surface, which we will rarely if ever see.

Ultimately, we are not dealing with a ministry or a program, we are dealing with people. So, as you venture into this weeding process in your ministry, do so with love. Do so with understanding and do so with absolute gentleness and love. Unlike a garden, where you can make a mistake and pluck a wildflower, some things will not just grow back.

Be gentle, be patient, and be kind.

3

“Locavore” Student Ministry



I live in the South.

It is an interesting place.

It has some of the best food in the world—with many “loca-vore” restaurants that serve only locally grown food. It’s a concept that’s gained a lot of traction as our culture becomes more health conscious. I’d like to relate it to student ministry a bit here.

The South has a natural beauty and, of course, its own very interesting vernacular. We are known for our long, drawn-out accents as well as the Southern hospitality that is communicated using all of those extra syllables.

People, like the tea, are very sweet. That part is true. Drivers wave when you pass, “Please” and “Thank you” are common, and there is a sense, at least from surface interactions, that people do not see you as an obstacle (unless you are in traffic in Atlanta on I 285).

Beware, though! Not everything is as it seems.

There are certain words and phrases that you must be aware of and know they have a double meaning.

Quick test:

A. Have you ever been in a conversation with a person from the South and they tell you a juicy piece of gossip and say that it is so you can be in prayer for the situation?

B. Have you ever had a person, many times older than you, find out something about you that they may not approve of and their reply or comment is, “Well bless your heart”?

If so, you probably know the importance of the subtext of these seemingly benign words. If you have spent any time at all in my neck of the woods you know that when someone is telling you gossip, it is not for prayer—it is for gossip! Also, if you have ever heard the words, “Well, bless your heart,” in that context you know without a doubt that you are not being blessed; you are being talked down to. Again, unless you are culturally fluent, these things will go completely unnoticed and you will miss the subtle yet very important nuances of the language.

Church languages are like this. Each church has its own unique, subtle language—sayings and inflections that you must not only be aware of but become fluent in.

I was working in a certain church early in my youth ministry career that was in a lower middle class working part of town. The church was what I call a polar church: it had youth, and it had older people, and not much in-between the poles. It was also the case that the two poles were pretty frigid toward one another.

One day one of the older members of the congregation, a staunch member of one of the poles, asked if he could talk with me. We proceeded to have a very nice conversation about how he and his Sunday school class wanted to volunteer to help paint the youth room. After I picked my jaw up off of the floor, I smiled, thanked him, and told him that I looked forward to talking about those possibilities.

After church I mentioned the offer to one of the families at lunch. I told them of the generous offer by one of the older Sunday school classes and how excited I was about them finally warming up to the youth ministry.

Suddenly a panicked look came over both the youth and the dad’s face. “When did he say they were going to paint it?” the dad asked frantically. I told them we had not decided on a date and were going to talk about it later. The dad immediately picked up his cell phone and started making calls. After a few minutes he came back and told me this class had been “at war” with the youth group for the past three years about the color of the youth room. By the way, the room was painted black with white crosses, with a very cool and well-done abstract Jesus on the wall. It was the only room in the church that was not circa 1968. This class was very angry because they believed the youth room should match the rest of the church and they had not been consulted when the change was made (though the church leadership had given their blessing).

Apparently they had been trying for years to figure out a way to get the youth room back to the “inviting” shade of muted mustard yellow the rest of the church was bathed in. As the new, young youth minister, I was their ticket. I also found out they’d planned a painting party that afternoon so it would be done quickly and no one could object. We were literally two to three hours from “muted mustard”–Gate.

Why? Because I did not know the language.

In ministry, you not only have to know the language, you also have to know the language behind the language.

There is a local dialect and culture. And you need to learn to speak it if you hope to influence it.

And the best way is to pay attention to the locals.

Spin Artists, Ringmasters, and Storytellers

You need to get over it; you are in the PR game.

You have to help the congregation see the whole picture of the youth, not just the broken window.

Knowing the language and the language behind the language is only the first part. You also have to know how to be the chief public relations officer for the youth ministry.

Now, I know what you are probably thinking: *I did not get into youth ministry to sell things. I just want the church to love the group for who they are. Isn't it dishonest to spin it?*