

## WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT IN YOUTH MINISTRY? Personal Formation? Methodology? Theology?

Published in Youthworker Journal (January/February, 2005)

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What's The Best Resource for Youth Ministry? (Other than the Bible of course) Is it a personal devotional book like *My Utmost for His Highest*? Is it a theology text book? Or is it the complete Ideas library? The answer is tell-tale about our priorities in youth ministry.

If I look at the brief history of youth ministry I would say that the Ideas library would come in first. Until fairly recently, youth ministry has almost exclusively focused on methodology. Youth ministry has not been known for spiritual depth or theological articulation. Its contribution has been the latest, most creative, active, often zany methods of Bible studies, games or worship. Personal formation was left to the individual and theology, well, theology was just left alone.

In the last decade or so youth ministry has refocused its priorities. Devotional classics have been republished for a new generation, Henry Nouwen appears in the *Youthworker Journal*, a rash of new publications focus on the spiritual formation of the youth worker as priority number one (The *Godbearing Life* and *Soul Shaper* are two of my favorites) and the emphasis in youth ministry training is changing from "tool" based workshops to "soul" based retreats. This is the way it should be. Youth ministers cannot lead others to spiritual maturity if they themselves are not being spiritually formed and transformed.

Theology has still not been addressed in any large measure. Youth ministers still rush out to partake of the latest creative and/or technological "tool" to "save kids" without examining whether the theology is actually biblical and helpful for promoting God's purposes in the world. "God is good, the devil is bad, Jesus loves me, I love Jesus" and the rest doesn't really matter and is left to denominational leaders and scholars. However, there are some positive signs on the horizon. A few youth ministry and theology journals now exist, some "theological" youth ministry books are being published and youth ministers are taking more time to think theologically about why they do what they do.

For youth ministry to "come of age" theology will need to leap ahead of methodology on our priority list. Youth ministers must lead the way in articulating a new theology that has both biblical integrity and cultural relevance for emerging generations. We live in a violent and uncertain time and the health and salvation of our children is at stake. The answer to the human predicament lies not in changing ministry methodologies, but in a deep repentance and conversion of our theologies. Merely changing the methodology is like tinkering with the paint job, when what we need is a full-scale theological renovation.