

feature

**THE ONLY**



A veteran youth pastor clears away the fog of ministry “must do’s” to focus on the eight practices that *really* do make a difference.

PLUS: “Growing a Youth Ministry That Looks Like Your Church”

# THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER

By Len Evans

**A**fter the board meeting an elder and the senior pastor asked to meet with me privately. The scheduled meeting we’d just finished was merely the pre-game show for the “real meeting” that was about to happen. “Len,” they told me, with gravity, “the youth ministry needs to undergo some dramatic changes over the next two months, or else...” Later, as I left the meeting, I turned around and asked, “Oh, by the way—what does ‘success’ look like in two months?” The elder replied, “We’ll know it when we see it.”


Thanks for the clarity on that.

It’s, of course, next to impossible to hit a bulls-eye when you have to guess where the target is hiding. Even though success looks different from church to church, it should never be tied to a church leader’s secretive satisfaction meter.

So, what does your bulls-eye look like, and where is it hiding? Obviously, you’re not the only one in your church who gets to answer that question. Other stakeholders (senior leadership and parents) have their own criteria for giving out “attaboys,” and I haven’t even mentioned how God defines a ministry’s success. But how do we sift through all of the competing bulls-eyes to focus on only those things that really matter?


I don’t have the eight easy steps to success in youth ministry, but after a lifetime in youth ministry I can point to eight bulls-eyes that really do matter.





## 1. “This above all: to thine own self be true.”

The mirror first reached out and slapped me when I filled out a simple personality assessment in college. I loved the strengths surfaced by the test, but then the psych major who was teaching the class ticked through the list of typical weaknesses for my “type”—I felt like I’d been caught on a security camera ripping off a 7-Eleven. The truth hurts, especially when the truth describes all the things you wish weren’t true about you. But self-knowledge is a critical foundation for ministry—it helps fuel your strengths and pull your “weeds.”




The more you understand your personality—your dreams, strengths, weaknesses, and the experiences that have shaped you—the more you can account for what makes you tick, and for what ticks you off. Ask a close friend, and your spouse if you have one, this simple question: How do you experience me? Then find something you can squeeze really hard while you keep your mouth shut and listen. You’ll soon come to grips with the reality of who you are.

Until you know yourself well, you will be both frustrated in ministry, and *frustrating* in ministry.




## 2. Uncover your church’s DNA.

The dynamics and differences between churches are as great as the differences between people. So you have to know the operational values of your church, its acceptable level of risk-taking, its history and baggage, its quirks, its “no-man zones,” and how things work (in reality).




This one is trickier because, too often, churches are not aware of the values they really hold until you break an unwritten rule you were supposed to have known. This typically involves brutal consequences. If you’re in a healthy situation the church’s articulated values will match its actual values. If they’re not even in the same zip code you’re headed for hardships.

I recommend finding a few people in the church (former elders or committee leaders, for example) who’ve been at the church for at least five years and have been involved in its inner workings. Ask a simple question: Describe the DNA of this church to me—the good, the bad, and the ugly.



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## 3. Make sure your approach to ministry meshes well with your church’s DNA.

I’ve seen too many friends fail because they were enamored by what some ministry somewhere else was doing and tried to duplicate it in their situation. It’s wise to learn from others, but it’s not wise to think you can just add water and prayer to the program in a box that’s being hawked to you from a successful church. You alone will not change your church or its culture.

But, if you enjoy banging your head against the wall until you pass out, sign up to be the lone change agent in your church. All change takes more time than you expect, so you have no choice but to find the happy overlap between your strategic vision for ministry and your church’s unique culture (see “Growing a Youth Ministry That Looks Like Your Church” on page 72 for more). If you can’t imagine “compromising” your vision, then you’re not long for your current job—it’d be good to start looking for something else so your church’s leaders can find someone who has a chance at longevity. In many cases there are no heroes and villains—there are only mismatched couples.

It’s a beautiful thing when you can wake up in the morning giddy because you’re so energized and excited to pursue your ministry right where you are. When you and your church’s culture are kindred spirits, life is good.



## 4. Be fully there.

I don’t care what grandma said, take the risk and put all your eggs in one basket. Don’t get distracted by the green grass somewhere else. Water, fertilize, and care for your own grass and you’ll discover how greenish green can truly be. Being fully where you are means you care more about the fish you just caught than “the one that got away.” That means you’re released to celebrate whatever good things other churches and youth ministries are doing in your area.

My church is a regular church with definite quirks, but they’re quirks I can live with. Thankfully, my church knows my quirks and they can live with me, too. Before I came here I interviewed with three nationally known churches—two of them went well beyond the initial step. One of them shared, after the fact, that they virtually cast lots to decide between me and the other candidate. To wonder about what could have been is a normal reaction when you’re grieving, but to regularly revisit “What-If World” is unhealthy.

Honestly, I never think about those dynamic churches that missed out on the Len Evans experience—instead, I'm truly grateful to be at my dynamically normal church, and my contentment drills deeper the longer I'm here. God, in his sovereignty, has plunked you down among a particular group of kids in a particular church and community. You owe it to them,

and yourself, to be fully there—not be distracted by where you could be.



## 5. Create and use a system to care for your church's teenagers.

It almost doesn't matter what system you use as long as it works with who

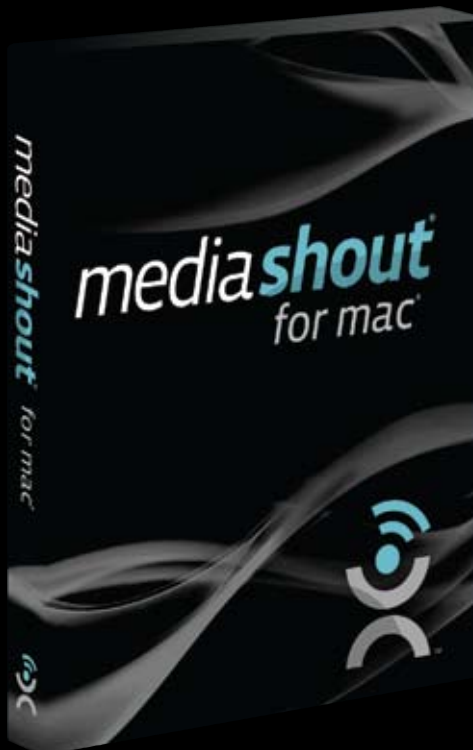
you are and who your church is. Small groups? Great! Campus visits? Wonderful! One leader assigned to stay in contact with five teenagers per month? Amazing! There are no Ten Commandments for shepherding your flock, but you need some way to regularly care for them.

I've found that recording my contacts with teenagers is a great way to track the kids I'm spending my time with. And it makes it easy for me to follow up with kids who are starting to slip through the cracks. Once, this even saved my hide when an angry mother called to complain that I hadn't talked to her kids in a while. I knew I had, and I even gave her the date that I sent a note to her daughter. She didn't believe me and implied that I was lying to her. Thankfully, she called a week later to apologize when she found my note in a pile of old bills.

Caring involves feeding and leading teenagers spiritually, knowing them by name, and ensuring there's an engaged adult in their life who's staying connected to them. You can't make your teenagers love you or your adult team, but you can "seed" your love in their lives and wait to see the green shoots. Inviting them to run errands with you or sending them semi-regular text messages are all small deposits into their "I Care About You" account.

If you want to spark a riot with angry pitchfork-wielding parents hunting you down, give them the impression you don't care for their children. You can't control perception, but you can buy "impression insurance" by implanting a system that shows you care for each individual teenager.

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## 6. Reach out to teenagers who are not a part of any church.

We have to love our church kids, but we also have to love teenagers who are outside the fold. People talk about balance between discipleship and evangelism, but I'm not sure balance is really achievable for most of us. I think most of us are wired to emphasize one over the other, and that's fine as long as you don't neglect the other. Until every person in your community is following Christ and has a church home, no church is too big.

Not many churches today can pull off the Jehovah's Witness strategy—every member going door-to-door for four hours on a Saturday. Outreach that fits your DNA may mean a quarterly event, a lock-in, training in relational evangelism, or simply encouraging your home-schooled kids to befriend one non-Christian.

## 7. Do all of this in natural, creative, and culturally relevant way.

A low-level outreach event such as a Battle of the Bands doesn't work everywhere, but it might work for your church ("works" is defined by the beholder, otherwise known as the janitor). Maybe the youth handbell choir is still a big deal in your church—if so, embrace it.

If you want to spark a riot, with angry pitchfork-wielding parents hunting you down, give them the impression you don't care for their children.



I've been a youth pastor in New Jersey, Connecticut, and twice in Texas. In my Texas context, Youth Night at the Rodeo (typically a Christian band performs) was a guaranteed winner, even if I had no teenagers in the Future Farmers of America. If I suggested the same idea to my Connecticut teenagers (if I could find a rodeo within a two-hour

drive), I'd be mocked and scorned.

Look for natural momentums that you can fuel in your context—grow wheat instead of pulling weeds (the Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13). With your adult leaders, brainstorm the historical "natural momentums" in your ministry, then create new ways to capitalize on them.

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## 8. Follow a “no one size fits all” mindset for success in youth ministry.

Throw the previous seven “only things that matter” into a blender and you’ll end up with a nice little protein smoothie, but not necessarily an effective new direction for your ministry. So, here’s a radical idea: take a 24-hour sabbatical to think, pray, and dream. Ask hard questions:

- What are my natural strengths—the things that others notice and compliment?
- What are my natural weaknesses—the things that make others uncomfortable, frustrated, and distrustful?
- Who do I want to become?
- What’s most important to me in my ministry?
- What’s most important to the church relative to my ministry?

- Where do these priorities overlap, and where are they at war with each other?
- What is the “orbital center” of my ministry—the belief that everything revolves around? Do I want that to be our orbital center? If not, what do I want it to be?
- What are the most obvious needs of the teenagers in my church, town, school systems, and community?
- What are we currently doing to address those needs? If I could only do one thing to address those needs, what would it be?

So, ask the questions, and add more of your own. Pray. Be quiet and listen. Write what you hear. Share all that with your allies in ministry and get their input. Then translate what you brainstorm into a plan. ■



**Len Evans** is a longtime youth pastor who wakes up giddy every day in his Texas home.



### WEB CONNECT

Go to Len's blog at [snavenel.blogspot.com](http://snavenel.blogspot.com).

# Growing a Youth Ministry That Looks Like Your Church

—By Brenda Seefeldt

A transplant surgeon must have a donor organ that’s compatible with his patient—otherwise, the body’s natural defenses will reject the new organ. Same goes in the church. If your youth ministry is incompatible with your church’s culture and values, it will never “take.” So, in the interests of compatibility:

- 1. Start by remembering why you were hired or nominated.** The committee or pastoral staff that hired or appointed you saw something in you they believed would merge well into the church’s mission. What were those qualities? Have you strayed from them? Has your plan for youth ministry changed? Did the church get the wrong perception of you in the beginning?
- 2. Honor your church’s unique role in the body of Christ.** What makes your church “stick out” in the community? How does your youth ministry reflect those unique

characteristics? If your youth ministry has a bent toward outreach, it should reflect your church’s bent toward outreach.

- 3. When you want to make a significant change, invite input from your senior leaders, elders, and volunteer staffers.** If you’re feeling God’s leading to include parents more or to start up small groups or a paintball ministry, make sure your stakeholders have a chance to shine light on your blindspots.
- 4. Ask for an evaluation of your youth ministry every three to six months.** Yes, that could be cumbersome. But it’s a great way to maintain a youth ministry that looks like the wider church family.
- 5. Leave a huge paper trail for everything you’re doing in youth ministry.** Put together monthly reports for your church’s leaders, even if you’re never asked to do it. When a memorable ministry moment happens, write

the story in an email and send it to all your church’s leaders. If something didn’t go as planned, send a “diagnosis” note to your senior pastor.

The blessing in all this is when you grow a youth ministry that looks like your church, you’ll be blessed with the reward of longevity. You’ll be around to see your sixth graders—and maybe even your church’s toddlers—graduate from high school. ■

**Brenda Seefeldt** is a longtime youth pastor in Virginia.

