

STRATEGIES FOR A HEALTHY YOUTH MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article presents strategies for a healthy youth ministry in the Black church, while reminding us that every youth ministry should be purpose-filled and Biblically-intentional in design. This article gives timely and practical advice that is necessary for youth ministry survival.

Introduction

Christian education in the 21st century must remain healthy; consequently, there is a great need for Christian educators in colleges and in churches to rethink the way they teach young leaders about youth ministry. There are three essential strategies in building a healthy youth ministry: Understanding the purpose, employing foundational principles, and incorporating various models for youth ministry. This article will highlight the purpose of youth ministry, while offering eight foundational principles and six models for a healthy youth ministry.

Why Youth Ministry?

The practice of youth ministry is essential to the individual spiritual growth of middle and high school students

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as well as to the church at-large. We see this in Scripture where God has used young people such as Jeremiah, David, Timothy, and Mary to achieve His purposes in the world. However, there are some schools of thought that purport that church youth ministry is a dying entity. I strongly disagree with this notion; but I will concur that youth ministry is quickly evolving into family ministry in an effort to empower parents to develop their children in the landscape of spiritual, emotional, and social needs.

For the purposes of clarity, this article focuses on the needs of sixth grade through twelfth grade students; however, these strategies can be adjusted to suit children's ministry participants.

Our youth face an overwhelming set of problems in the home and in the world at-large. Young parents, teachers, and grandparents are frustrated and discouraged. School shootings, bullying, academically-failing schools, self-image issues, teen promiscuity, unwanted pregnancies, and incarcerated parents are just a few of the daily struggles that are plaguing our young people.

Jesus made time for young people. When we welcome them, we welcome Him. (Matt. 18:1-5; 19:14). Children have a natural, untainted curiosity about God; without a healthy place for our children to learn about Jesus and His ways, we find them actively living a life without God which consequently leads to all of the aforementioned dilemmas. Our world is filled with too many unproductive citizens who lack direction on how to live a Christ-centered life. This leads to generational curses and whole communities who are hell-bound (Romans 1:21-32).

Youth ministry is a safe place for youth to discover Jesus- either to supplement home instruction or to substitute for a lack of home Biblical teaching. Unlike the Boys and Girls Club, Girls Scouts, and public school sports teams, youth ministry exists to prepare young souls for service in God's kingdom as a future parent, college student, grocery store

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cashier, the military, vocational ministry, or on whatever path God takes them. Youth ministry is intended to instruct and disciple youth in what it means to be a Christian, how to mature as a Christian, and how to lead others to claim Jesus as their Savior, thereby preparing them for the remaining chapters of their lives. As a church, we cannot operate with the “business as usual” stance. Our children are dying and in need of spiritual mentoring that prepares them for the circumstances that they are currently facing as well as their future. We will examine strategies that are Biblically-based with “tried and true” practical help that Christian educators can use right now in church or para-church organizations. This research is based on known trends among youth as well my nearly twenty years as a volunteer and staff member in inner-city and rural churches. My passion comes from my heart’s desire to see every young person discover their lifelong place in God’s plan for their lives.

Eight Foundational Principles of a Healthy Youth Ministry

- A Strong, Non-toxic View of Youth Ministry
- A Clear Vision and Mission Statement
- Consistent, Accountable Leadership of the Youth Minister/Youth Minister Leader
- Selection of the Youth Ministry Team/ Who Should Lead?
- Solid Teamwork Ethic
- Partnering with Parents
- Proper Awareness of Trends
- Understanding Church Demographics

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A Strong, Non-toxic View of Youth Ministry

A healthy youth ministry begins with a strong, non-toxic view of young people among church-members-at-large, but namely the Senior Pastor. What is the view of young people and their role in the church? Is youth ministry important to your church? Is just having a youth choir or ball team enough? All of these views must be weighed against a Biblical understanding of youth ministry. Without a consistent, positive view of young people in the church, there will inevitably be gaps in results.

Have a Clear Vision and Mission Statement

The mission statement should be clearly communicated verbally and in writing. It will create the overall framework of your church's youth ministry and it should support the overall mission and vision of the senior pastor and church. This statement should reflect the direction of God in the youth ministry and should also specify measurable results that are regularly discussed throughout the year. In *Beyond the Classroom*, Sandidge (2001) states: "The mission statement is a vision of where the African American church is headed. It informs others about the pastor's beliefs, ministry, and mission and provides information about the pastor's future personal and communal growth" (p.47). A clear vision and mission statement will aid educators and pastors in a balanced planning of events. For instance, if one is focusing on evangelism, fellowship, worship, Bible study, missions, or mentoring, calendar items should reflect these components. Additionally, calendars should include times of renewal and learning for the leaders, parents, and youth ministry team members. This combats spiritual burnout.

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Consistent, Accountable Spiritual Life of the Youth Minister/Youth Ministry Leader

In order to be effective as a leader, one must have a solid, healthy, vibrant relationship with Jesus. In *Strategies for the Director of Christian Education*, Sandidge (2001) reminds leaders that they provide a service for the Lord (p.87). Leaders need to be in touch with the Holy Spirit and spend daily quiet time with God, meditating on His word and praying. Time spent fasting can eliminate distractions. Breaks and retreats should be taken when there is a need for church leadership to be refreshed. Care should be taken about what is allowed into one's mind and spirit. Attendance in corporate Bible study and worship is important; students cannot be expected to go to church regularly if they never see their leader going. Be accountable to other Godly leadership (Senior Pastor, youth minister). Be accountable to other Godly peers/mentors. Confront, confess, and repent from sin; maintain private integrity. Be a servant to God and to students and their families; pray for them by name.

Who Should Be on the Youth Ministry Team?

It is very important to realize that in such a position of educator, having a team is indispensable; it is not realistic to think that the leader is able to adequately relate to every person in the youth group. "Lone Ranger" ministry is ineffective and tiresome. "Lone Ranger can easily lose sight of the mission. Since there is no organizational or relational connection to the overall mission of the church, it is easy to get lost in the micro-purpose of the ministry and forget the macro-vision of the organization" (Morgan and Stevens, 2005, p.136). Thoughts such as "No one else will do it," "I'm the only one qualified," or "They are paying me to do it all" are lies that usually come from a place of arrogance, ignorance about the youth ministry leader's role, and spiritual burn-out.

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You may want to have a celebration when anyone has the slightest propensity toward youth ministry. However, one must be cautious. I am sure that the youth ministry leader can point to some spiritual casualties because of the actions of an overzealous young adult who is a new Christian. Too often, the church will throw these baby Christians in the youth group to play around until they are exhausted, have a fall, or act inappropriately with the youth. When this occurs, we are usually left with more misguided youth who do not trust adults. Use sound judgment when the guy who just got out of prison has a “word for the youth”. If a person is not solid in the Lord with a visible passion for Him first, a youth leader could be doing more damage than good to the church youth. Also, beware of the overuse of music or sports –youth ministry is much more than just a youth choir or a ball team.

Viable ministry for *all* students is the goal. Also, numerical growth is not as significant as spiritual growth; if Jesus is at the center of the ministry, the youth leader is not operating just to draw a crowd. Trust God for the increase and celebrate the number of students who are currently attending. “I feel that a smaller youth group enables you to know each student in a more personal way and you can be much more involved in their daily lives” (Caro, 2011, p.12). Think quality first, rather than quantity in youth ministry.

Who Should Lead?

Some of the questions to ask potential youth leaders include: Do you like kids? Are you willing to follow the church’s leadership/vision? Why do you want to be on the youth ministry team? Choosing a cross section of young adult, college students, seniors, and parents with a variety of careers and spiritual maturity is necessary. A ratio of two to three students per adult is a manageable number if a team is short on leaders, but praying for God to send more help is advisable (Matthew 9:35-38). Team members should be

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leaders and not just youth workers. Youth meetings should state the seriousness of the task and how participants must be consistently working on their own spiritual growth. The youth ministry leader should provide support to all youth workers. “Empowerment is more than delegation” (Morgan, Stevens, 2005, p.219). Modeling what a healthy relationship with a young person should look like is imperative. Additionally, a clearly defined job description for each team member is another important element. This will eliminate confusion and make room for more accountability. Spiritual gifts assessments are helpful in knowing what team members are best suited for youth ministry assignments. Also, the church’s policy on background checks must always be taken into account. Team members should always feel that the youth ministry leader values their contributions to the team. They must be allowed to have ownership of the ministry. This frees the youth leader to handle administrative obligations and to attend mandatory church meetings. Encouragement of youth workers with team retreats, regularly scheduled time off, conferences, books, prayer, and positive phone calls is another strategy that will help. Urging students to write letters to youth workers is a great confidence boost. I have received some beautiful Facebook “shout-outs,” texts, and calls from former students.

Monthly “chit-chats” are a great way to connect with each team member. The youth ministry team can meet at coffee shops and cheap fast-food restaurants, for no more than an hour to discuss worker’s concerns, trends, well as to give encouragement to each other. Spend time laughing (it is okay!), praying for each other, and praying for all students by name. Focus on creating a climate where the youth ministry team feels comfortable in asking for help to be their best. I am very grateful that my pastor and church family is gracious in allowing me time off to visit my family and they also pay for me to attend a youth leader conference in the spring. I am able to refresh myself with more energy to serve. Once a year,

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treat the youth ministry team to a free meal with fellowship, preferably at your home with loads of encouragement and gratitude for their time. This will build community and give the leaders a better grasp of God's vision for the youth ministry. Remember, as the youth minister/ministry leader your role is to empower those who serve our youth.

The Importance of Teamwork

Teamwork on the part of the senior pastor, parents, youth ministry team, the youth themselves, and other ministries is vital. Youth ministry is church-wide: all ministries within the church should work as a team. The flow of ministry in each church is dependent on the leadership. There must be mutual respect between the Sr. Pastor and youth ministry leader. Micromanaging has no place in ministry; however, accountability, constructive criticism, and recognition of the vision of the pastor are necessary in having a teamwork ethic.

Partnering with Parents

Many parents have no clue as to how to raise their children. Some are understandably frustrated. Perhaps their own background is filled with toxicity. Perhaps they are single and raising their children with no financial and spiritual support. If they are working several jobs, they simply struggle with finding the time to properly train their children in the Lord. If a parent is unsaved themselves, they are significantly at a disadvantage in passing on a Jesus that they have never experienced. The Bible clearly gives parents the mandate to teach their children about God and how to live for Him (Deut.6:1-9; 11:18-21).

The job as the youth minister/youth ministry leader is to walk alongside parents in fulfilling this Biblical mandate. We have spent too much time in the church beating parents up without giving them real tools to effectively teach their

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children. Early in ministry, I was full of energy with no kids of my own, and I thought that I was not qualified to help a parent. This is not true. Parents need encouragement. Many are suffering in silence or have lost hope. Since the youth ministry leader (or another youth leader) should have a good relationship with children, the youth ministry leader is exactly the person to help. Sometimes youth will share life issues with another adult rather than their parents. It is important that the youth leader and parent are on the same page and that both have the student's best interests at heart. The youth leader should not encourage a child to be against his or her parents - that is unhealthy. Build trust with parents – youth leaders should not try to take the parents' place. Confidentiality with students is acceptable unless there is danger involved.

Parent support groups are a good way to help parents engage in dialogue with each other. One-day and weekend parent retreats without the kids are a good way to encourage such dialogue. Having parents focus on what they love about being a mom or dad and giving them information about birth order theories can enhance their parenting skills. Christian parenting websites are also helpful tools.

Family retreats with the kids are helpful in building unity in the family. "Getting to know you" activities, instructions on how to do family devotion time and writing a family covenant should be included in your retreat agenda. The youth ministry leader can facilitate this retreat with or without a guest speaker in a hotel banquet room, combine with another church, or at the large home of a church member.

A parent newsletter or parent spotlights (what are they doing in their home to lead their children to God?) can be shared on youth Sunday. Young people who are good writers can be responsible for writing news articles. Family mission projects are also a great way to build community and teamwork. At my church, we have family missions' month. It is a series of short-term projects like serving at a homeless

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shelter, making sandwiches for the homeless, and making cards for the sick and shut-in of our church. Teach Bible studies that focus on students getting along with parents. Sending information to parents regularly with reminders of upcoming events is another good way of ensuring communication with them. The youth ministry leader might be saying: "When I have a parent meeting, no one shows up!" Some parents only contact the youth ministry leader when there is a crisis - at 1a.m. That can serve as a good starting point for communication.

Home visits are a great way to connect with parents and these should be scheduled whenever it is convenient for them. Sharing information from retreats or parent meetings if they did not attend is a way of keeping them connected. Delegating some of these tasks to other team members helps prevent the large burden of some of those late night, frantic phone calls. Parents are more likely to participate when they see that youth leaders are visibly serious about helping them to succeed as a parent.

Proper Awareness of Trends

When considering the health of the church's youth ministry, it can be valuable to be aware of current trends and what other churches are doing; however, the youth ministry leader must pray and seek God about what His plan is for the church-which may not be what another ministry is doing. Many times we covet the ministries of others and have no idea as to what God's unique assignment is for our church. What is the background or tradition of youth ministry in your church? What has worked in the past? What is working now? What is not working? Keeping in mind that tradition is not always a dirty word; youth leaders should always have a purpose for whatever strategies they are employing. A critical consideration of what piques the interests of young people and youth in general, through the lens of the Bible, is a

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significant way to determine what trends will best support the overall ministry vision.

Understanding Church Demographics

What are the demographics of the church family and church neighborhood? What is the church's history in the city? What do the seniors of the church think of youth ministry? What are the needs? What is the median income or educational level of your church and neighborhood? What do the current youth think about church and God? What are their spiritual needs? What is God bidding the leader to do through prayer? Brainstorming, taking surveys, and praying without are all invaluable tools. The answers to these questions will determine the direction of youth ministry at your church.

Six Models for a Healthy Youth Ministry:

- Bible Study Strategies/Teaching Helps
- Youth-Led Worship
- How to Do Mission Trips on a Tight Budget
- Incorporating Social Media
- Ways to Become Better Acquainted with Youth and Their World
- Ways to Stay Encouraged

Bible Study Strategies/Teaching Helps

Pray and study. Pray and study some more (2 Timothy 2:15)! Rick Lawrence suggests that two questions should continually be asked of your students: "Who do I say Jesus is? Who does Jesus say I am? (Lawrence, 2014, pp.74-75). Determining the needs of one's audience is crucial. This is where a leader's relationship with the youth is useful. What is God teaching me in this passage? How can this lesson be applied in my life and in the lives of my students? Involving

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students in the lesson through role- playing, group projects, case studies (with discussion), and skits are proven methods. Asking open-ended, leading questions; making the class inviting for each student, new and old is very important. Start each session asking for prayer concerns and testimonies, and what is going on in their world. It is best for snacks to be served ahead of time; students are usually more focused after eating. As for the end of each session, conclude with the plan of salvation, a challenge, and homework.

Scripture memory should be encouraged; students cannot get too much of the Word through group challenges, quiz bowls, and Scripture hunts. Use crafts, games, and audio/visual aids. Research Jesus' teaching style, using parables and object lessons. Have students anonymously pick topics that they would like to discuss. Also, allow students to come up with a name for their Bible study group. When students take ownership, they are more excited and they will invite their peers! Be prepared and maintain your personal integrity. "Thrown together" lessons do not glorify God. A teacher's teaching is only as effective as his or her preparation. "If it looks like you just threw things together for your students, it'll come across that way and they'll respond accordingly" (Caro, 2011, p.6).

Youth leaders should take full advantage of opportunities to enhance their teaching skills such as seminary, Bible colleges, conferences, and teachers' meeting. It has been my experience that gender-focused small groups are very effective for Wednesday night Bible study. By separating girls and guys, youth are more open to sharing life issues and gender-specific concerns. For instance, girls are able to talk more freely about sexual purity, personal hygiene, and self-esteem issues with the safety of a spiritual female leader.

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Youth- Led Worship

Youth-led worship services are a great way to help young people to publicly express their love for God while showcasing their talents in singing, dancing, ushering, public speaking, and praying. It is also a way to show the church at-large what is going on in the youth ministry. Parents are always excited to see their children participating in worship. This is a great way to involve more parents in church attendance. When planning a youth Sunday, youth leaders should meet with the pastor and worship leader/choir director. Some churches have youth Sunday monthly or once a quarter. Instead of just having choir rehearsal, parents and other participants should be invited to consecration a few days before Sunday where youth leaders can talk to students about true worship and heart preparation for worship. Youth ushers, the dance team, Scripture readers, those who are leading in prayer, and those doing youth sermons should be encouraged to attend this time of consecration.

How to Do Mission Trips/Projects on a Tight Budget

Mission trips and mission projects are excellent ways to fulfill the Great Commission and they also give you as the leader a measurable way to assess whether or not students are applying all those Bible studies! I am always amazed by parents and youth who say 'there is nothing for the youth to do in our city'; or 'I'm bored'. There has never been a shortage of those who are hungry, homeless, or needing the message of the Cross. Involving students will help to eliminate some of the self-entitlement mentality. Checking with the local shelter to see what the needs are and having students brainstorm ways to serve in their church and neighboring community is a good starting point. My mother's youth Sunday school class makes Christmas boxes for the military serving overseas and it has produced church-wide involvement and excitement.

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Organize a day in the church's community by cleaning up, passing out bottled water, and prayer walking. I usually have my students to pair up with a partner, pray for God's guidance, and decide who will introduce themselves to someone and who will ask pray with someone for prayer. Adult males should be present to ensure safety. One time, one of my teens had the opportunity to pray with a woman who had been struggling with alcohol. He felt so good about how God had used him.

Another way to share Jesus with the neighboring community is Backyard Bible Clubs. Backyard Bible clubs can be described as a "crash VBS" lesson at a church member's home or at the park near the church. It is basically a Bible lesson with a craft, games and snacks. It usually lasts about an hour for kids under nine years old. It is a great way to introduce the church to the neighborhood and unchurched parents usually come too! Teenagers should be allowed to lead it. Flyers can be passed out beforehand with information about VBS. It is also an ideal time to sign up kids for VBS, too. I have seen kids come to Jesus and start attending our church all because they attended Backyard Bible Club.

Mission trips are a great way for youth leaders to leave their comfort zone. It is important to stress to students and adult leaders that a mission trip is not a vacation, but that the purpose is to serve Jesus and to share Him with the lost. If a student or adult leader is not an active member of Bible study/worship, they should not be selected. We have done evangelism studies to prepare participants as well. The youth ministry leader may experience some resistance, but the teamwork component of a mission trip will suffer if participants are not spiritually prepared. This will also encourage students who regularly attend.

Mission Trip Checklist

Where are we going and why? What are the needs?
How long are we staying? How will we get there? How long

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will it take to get there? Have I given my adult leaders enough time to take off from work? Job assignments: Who is doing what? Have I enlisted teachers for Bible study/Sunday school while we are away? What should be included in my parent meeting? A folder or packet with permission slips, supply lists, medical release forms, journals, Scripture readings, schedules, and host site contact information should be given to students and parents.

Mission Trip/Project Follow-up

As a follow up, youth should give a report to the congregation, create slideshows, have a statement from the host church or mission site to be read aloud to the congregation on youth Sunday or a church's annual day. A special fellowship can be held to share memories and discuss what improvements can be made for the next trip. I would suggest doing a weekend mission trip within the state or nearby state first; eventually, a week-long or international mission trip can be taken.

Ways to Cut Costs on Mission Trips

If participants camp out at the host site or the church where they will be serving and if the host site or church can provide some meals, then this will help cut costs. Ask church members to donate food items or money for road trip snacks, cheap meals, and craft supplies. Request church members or others outside of the church to sponsor a youth. Holding youth fundraisers is a way in which youth can raise money for mission trips. Other fun ways to raise money include a bake sale at church or a fellowship dinner with students serving the food. Elderly church members can "rent a youth" to come to their house in order to rake leaves, wash cars, and windows.

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These members can also donate to the missions fund on behalf of those students. One time, several students helped a wheel-chair bound church member to organize books and stacks of papers. Another time, students helped a ninety-nine year old senior of our church. Afterwards, the students sat around as she shared what her life was like as a teenager. Before we left, the youth prayed for them. We were just as blessed as those we were serving!

Incorporating Social Media

Social Media is a mainstay in the lives of nearly every American. It is important not to shy away from it. It is a great way to send notes to students, parents, and youth ministry team members. Also, youth ministry team leaders should be mindful of their actions and the actions of other youth ministry team members on social media; they must exemplify a Christian witness online as well. Social media can also be used to make announcements and give reminders. The church can also hold workshops for parents and youth on the dangers of social media; it is a teaching tool that can be used to hold students accountable for their actions outside of church.

Ways to Become Better Acquainted with Youth and Their World

School lunches are a great way to spend time outside of church with young people while giving youth ministry team leaders the opportunity to see where students spend the majority of their day. Talk with their teachers and principal with the permission of parents. Also, be mindful of language and demeanor; it is important to be non-threatening in the approach to the staff as well as other students. A youth leader is there to observe and spend time with a student - not to push a religious or church agenda. Also, the youth leader can

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partner with Christian groups on campus as a sponsor or guest speaker. If your church does not have a tutoring program, perhaps partnering with other churches or community centers to provide a resource for academically-struggling students would be a viable option. Assigning volunteers, retirees, and college students to go to ball games, recitals, and competition is another good way for youth leaders to connect with youth. There is nothing better than seeing a student beam with pride when the youth leader or another church member shows up at their school or event. Random, impromptu gatherings at the mall, concerts, and non-calendar events are also some of the best ways to connect with students. Taking youth to shop for supplies or to sort and staple papers are some of the best moments in ministry because it is relaxed and informal. As it relates to self-esteem building, students should “embrace their true name by refusing to dwell on the superficial qualities that have nothing to do with who they truly are. Catch teenagers in the act of reflecting Jesus-when you see students doing things that reflect the character of Jesus Christ, let them know! Name them, even when they can’t name themselves” (Lawrence, 2014, 218-219). Youth leaders should help students to discover who they are in the Lord.

Ways to Stay Encouraged

Keeping cards, letters, pictures, and memories of good phone calls nearby as well as keeping in touch former students are ways to help you to stay in the race. Spend time with people who share your heart and passion for youth ministry. Have others pray for you at all times; find a shoulder to lean on, cry on. Find healthy ways to vent. Grumbling and complaining to non-spiritual folks is a time-waster that will leave youth leaders bitter and resentful. Keep a journal of your prayers to God and make sure to get a spiritual tune-up. Taking regular breaks is very important. Encourage youth

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leaders to take one-day retreats at the park or at a cheap hotel as a way to help them relax. Healthy self-improvement is necessary to have a balanced spiritual life. Involve yourself in activities that enhance your spiritual growth, mental health, and physical well-being. Join the gym! Laugh! Have some mindless fun!

I hope that by now the readers of this article have a better understanding of the blessings and burdens of youth ministry. Every day will not be fun, but every day is worth it. One might say that this is too much to handle and they will be correct; it *is* too much to handle - *without* Jesus (Philippians 4:13). We must understand that the outcome of our efforts is in God's hands - we cannot save every child, make them accept Christ, or force them to make the right decisions (Colossians 3:17, 23-25). Remember, when God sends, He also equips! My prayer is that this article, a labor of love from me, will inspire youth leaders to continue serving young people with God's purposes in mind. Our youth need help even if they do not know how to ask for it. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

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