

BEST PRACTICES:

HOW TO IMPLEMENT DISCIPLESHIP IN YOUTH MINISTRY

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Here are ten practices to implement discipleship in youth ministry. Just for clarity, these items are in no particular order. I would recommend trying to add a piece of each of them in your ministry.

1. DON'T DO MINISTRY ALONE

"O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them" (John 17:25–26).

It wasn't often that you read about Jesus being alone during His ministry years. When He was doing what we would call "ministry," He always had people with Him. He was a master at asking questions He already knew the answer to in order to help His disciples grow. He gave His disciples the ability to use their gifts and corrected them when they were wrong.

In any ministry, the first thing you should do to create disciples is to determine not to do ministry alone. As a younger leader I always built my vision off of the question, "What can I build?" But as time went on, I started to really desire a legacy and began to instead ask, "Who can I build?"

Invite students to serve with you anywhere you can. Ask them pointed questions that help them grow. I have learned asking a good question that helps someone realize the answer on their own is more powerful than a piece of advice. Take time to explain to them the why, not just the what, behind what you do.

Recently, as I was setting up chairs in the church, I was being very particular about how they were arranged, and the young men helping me looked at me like I was crazy. I forgot that I was showing them the what, but not explaining the why. I had to explain my heart to bring excellence to God's house. How people, whether they realize it or not, know we care when they come into a church that is put together. We set the atmosphere for the Holy Spirit in everything we do. After a few moments with them, they began to take setting up the rows even more serious than me.

Jesus said in John 17 that He had made God known to His disciples and they will continue to make Him known. Jesus was confident that He lived His life in a way that showed them how to continue on. True discipleship comes from opening your life to those around you.

2. FAMILY NIGHTS

Family nights are another way we have seen huge growth in students' lives. About twelve years ago, I shifted our ministry from an event-driven ministry to a family ministry. This shift came after a huge failure with an event—there is nothing like messing up to make you shift. After only a fraction of our youth ministry showed up and I lost a ton of money, I was so frustrated. I remember saying to God, "I planned this huge Christian concert and they didn't care." I heard in my spirit God say, "Jeremy, youth don't join concerts. They join gangs." Now, I knew what that meant: if you talk to a member of a gang and ask them why, typically they respond, "They're my family."

I shifted everything to family ministry, and one of the greatest moves we made was recruiting parents to be leaders in our ministry. I thought if we are going to be a family, we need Godly examples of parents; so I asked those parents to be youth pastors with me. Once a month we organize family nights. The idea is, every parent leader (including me) invites students over to their house. We eat dinner and enjoy family time, like throwing a ball in the backyard, playing board games, etc. Then we sit together and have a family Bible study.

It was amazing to see the students connect to the families. I remember moments where students were almost in tears because they couldn't believe families actually still had dinner together. This, over time, made our group so tight. You see, students may choose to attend a concert, but they will do anything they can to be a part of a family.

3. STUDENT-LED MINISTRY

Student-led ministry came out of the whole family idea as well. We shifted our ministry to be almost completely run by students. Adults oversee every area and are there for wisdom and training. One of my key sayings in ministry is "purpose over perfection."

If you've ever been a part of Cadre, you've heard Jeanne Mayo say, "You build in the years, not the days." And I took that to heart. I'm okay if we mess up sometimes if we are building students. Our goal is to help students find their gifts and help them grow in them; everything from preaching and worship team to first impression and media. One of our students, Joseph, created videos for the church. He has now gone on to work for the Prince of Dubai and is one of the best photographers in the world.

You never know where they can go until you give them the opportunity to start.

4. FINE ARTS

We often hear it said that Fine Arts is about ministry, and I agree. For our students, Fine Arts has been a great way to be disciplined. It is the best small group ministry we have seen—students become teams and work so hard together. It is also one of the best ways to connect fringe students to a group of friends.

Our coaches do Bible studies at practice, pray for the students, help them develop their gifts, and cheer them on. We then provide an arena for them to deploy their gifts. This Easter, our lead pastor Jim Hennesy asked for some students to preach with him during the Good Friday service. It was amazing to watch our students step up and preach so well. The thing is, they were ready; they've been preaching in the short sermon category for years.

5. PICK YOUR TWELVE

Where two or three are gathered Jesus is there. I know often times we push for the big crowds and Instagram angles, but it is so important that during the week you are intentionally reaching out to students. I always say to our leaders, "pick your twelve." Find twelve students you really want to concentrate on in that season. For me, I always try to concentrate on a few tough cases, but I also focus on students who show they really want to lead. Set up lunches or coffee shop hangs with two or three students a week (post COVID-19) and pour into their lives.

6. QUICK TEXTS

What I call "quick texts" may feel like cheating, but it works. I write up a general encouraging text, then copy and paste it to several individuals once a month. It's amazing to see the responses. Oftentimes people are so thankful and respond with things like, "This is exactly what I needed today." Sometimes the best thing you can do to build someone up is simply encourage them.

7. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Good old-fashioned Bible studies are so important to discipleship. I firmly believe that many students fall away from the faith when they graduate simply because they don't know the Bible. Take a poll of your students—you may be shocked about how little they actually know. I once had a student ask me where Adam and Eve currently lived.

Create opportunities for students to be taught the Bible. For this, I often recruit people from our Christian Education area that I can also learn from.

8. DON'T BE AFRAID OF CONFLICT

The worst times can often become some of the best times. When students are upset or hurt by one another, one of the first things I'll say to those involved is, "This is a good thing. We are going to learn and grow from this." I try to take these situations from "How do we fix this?" to "How can we learn to be better from this?" Oftentimes students will stop and realize their mistakes on their own and then we can evaluate how to be better.

If you're involved in a conflict, never be a leader who refuses to admit when you mess up. You'll find yourself gaining a lot more ground with your students if you can say, "I see where I could have done better and I'm sorry." Never allow a bad situation to only be a bad memory. Be intentional and help people grow through it.

9. DISCIPLE THROUGH THE BROKENNESS

A heartbreaking moment of discipleship is when you find your student at rock bottom. Usually when they're this low, they don't need to hear they're wrong.

A few years ago, I had a student who chose to drink and drive and he was in a horrible accident. I remember sitting in the jail with him as he wept. In that moment I didn't need to say, "You know you were wrong here." Instead I said, "Jesus still loves you and so do I. We will walk with you through this."

This isn't a moment of discipleship through teaching; it's a moment of being there for your student and representing Jesus. That young man is still in prison but he is living for Jesus. He hasn't quit because in his worst moment he learned Jesus wouldn't quit.

10. EQUIP STUDENTS IN THEIR DREAMS

The greatest leaders create opportunities to lead. Students know they can come to me with a dream and I will do my best to help them see it through to reality.

The best way to see growth is to help them find responsibility. A young man came to me a few years ago and wanted to start a Bible club in his school. I helped him make flyers and taught him everything I knew about editing in about five minutes. The next week he came to me disappointed because only a few people showed up. I thought for a moment and did what any self-respecting youth pastor would do: "Let's have a pizza party." The next week he advertised a pizza party, and on the day of the Bible club I delivered the pizzas. Over one hundred students showed up, and I had the chance to watch him preach the gospel to his peers.

Through the years, I watched that young man grow as a leader as he lead that Bible club at school. Our youth group also doubled in size that year—I give Zach a lot of credit for that. Be someone who helps your students succeed and teach them through the tough moments as they lead.