

## A 25-Year Bonus

**Yep. That's me – a LONG time ago. The girl is Alisa. Here's her (abbreviated by me) story:**

*My dad died when I was a baby, my mom remarried several times, and I was bounced around. Church was not allowed. By the time I could drive, I really had no parental guidance or guidelines, so when I turned 16 I could "sneak" to church. That I found Son City was God's hands all over me.*

*After graduation, a man I started dating turned out to be a pure con artist. He swept me off my feet, and we were married in six months, and I had a son eleven months after we married. My husband turned out to be a very bad man, so when my baby was six weeks old I literally walked through the woods to a friends' house and never looked back. After a long court battle, I never heard from him again. God protected me the entire way :)*

*I remarried, and wanted more children but miscarried several times. I became pregnant for a fourth time and spent the entire pregnancy very ill. I lost 29 pounds in the first three months, had to be fed by IV's for six months, went into labor at seven months and delivered at 8 months. I was told for the first two months (while in ICU and getting dangerous meds) that I must have an abortion or I would die. Ken, you will never know how many times I thought of the day you held my hand as I accepted Christ. I knew I was strong enough and God would take care of us. He did! They told me that my baby would be physically and mentally challenged – but Ken; he is perfect in every way!*

*I started having seizures shortly after we moved to a different state. After five years, the doctors finally figured out that I have a rare disorder called Dysautnomia, a scary diagnosis but I have beaten all the odds :)*

*Thanks for listening to my life story. I needed to tell you because you are the reason Jesus held me up through it all, and I have always wanted to thank you!*

That's what I'm calling a "Twenty-Five-Year Bonus Check." You stick around long enough in youth ministry, and you'll be blessed out of your socks by what God does in the lives of your young friends long after they've left your youth ministry.

And that's the point of sharing Alisa's story with you. You see, in this issue we focus on graduating seniors. You'll find articles and resources in this magazine that will help you to make the most of your final opportunities with the senior class. In fact, this YLO includes a copy of *ConGRADulations! Class of 2009*.

Even though your seniors are graduating, your ministry with them should continue for years to come. You don't just work with teenagers; you befriend them, guide them, console them, counsel them, and lead them to Jesus.

I hope that the music, articles, Bible studies, re:Tuned discussion guides, reviews, and lead sheets of this *Youth Leaders Only* will help you to make a difference in a young life. Maybe twenty-five years from now you'll get a bonus check!

Godspeed,

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# Seniors May Be Dangerous To Your Health

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*I have hated graduation time for twenty years now. When all those graduation announcements arrive in the mail, I start to get a little grumpy.*

Then, well-meaning people say to me, “You must be so proud to see these kids graduate!” I paste on a polite wooden smile and say, “It’s quite a day.” But inside I snap, “No! Can’t you see that I am losing my best kids – the ones I enjoy the most?”

Clearly that is too dramatic, but anyone in youth ministry who has a brain, a heart, and three years of experience understands that the job is dangerous to your health. The longer we stay in it, the more we learn the dangerous truth: seniors leave, and it hurts when they do.

That loss at graduation may affect our ministry. As each school year begins, fully pouring yourself into the new kids is more difficult because you know they will leave eventually. But every fall, young ones show up, bouncing and smiling, demanding silently, “Love us as you loved them!” We smile back, and then stagger away, unable to remember the recent graduates ever being this goofy.

If we pull back just a little each year, at some point we realize that we are closer to the folks in the fading photographs on the wall than the real people standing there in the room. It becomes easy to say that we have “aged-out” of youth ministry. If the loss gets bad enough, someone will eventually find us in some storage closet tangled in volleyball nets, mumbling about pizza toppings. Or worse, we become senior pastors.

The normal human response is to go numb or go away, but we are not called to be normal. We are the Christians. More correctly, we are the leaders of the Christians. So how do we respond? Yes, there is need for Sabbath. Yes, there is need for us to take the time to process the grief of loss at graduation. Yes, we need to avoid punishing the new kids for our pain.

Every school year, I reread **Philippians 2:5-8** and remember that Jesus stepped from His worship-drenched, angel-guarded throne into a dangerous world that assured Him pain and death. He

left the safe place to go to a risky place, because He loves us. We, as His weak imitators, must leave the safety of our emotional defenses and love the new kids. Through that process, we better understand the persistence of God in moving toward us, better understand the sacrifice of Jesus for us, and then live it out in front of kids, so they can better understand it by watching us.

I am not calling for denial or perfection, but rather a measured, intentional fulfillment of our painful calling to love well. I’m suggesting we lay down our lives in imitation of Christ and not allow the fear of future loss to derail our calling and our impact right now.

Here are some ideas to ease the pain of graduation.

#### **Celebrate the transition.**

Have a Junior/Senior dinner a few weeks after graduation. Invite your adult leaders, your graduates, and your rising seniors to a nice dinner. Have them dress up. Let the parents come as well.

Ask the seniors to talk about their best memory, worst memory, and most significant lesson learned. Just use it as a time to debrief. Tell each one what your best memory was of him or her. Be honest. Tell them it is difficult to send them out. Tell them they will leave holes in the ministry, not to make them guilty, but to value them and their contributions.

Then have a graduate challenge the rising seniors to set examples in the group. Have graduates pray over the rising seniors and pass the mantle of leadership to them. Charge the rising seniors to come to group no longer as students but as leaders who have a responsibility to serve and bless the younger kids. (This eases the problem of seniors wandering off because of lack of purpose.)

#### **Keep in touch.**

Keep up with your graduates through email or an alumni website. If they go off to college, consider a road trip with another leader to visit and encourage each one to follow Christ faithfully.

#### **Have a reunion.**

After you have been in ministry for a while, have a reunion of your graduates. Make it a big deal or just have dinner and talk. Get some of the influencers from past years to organize it. Show old pictures and videos. Let some of them talk if they want. Invite them all, the “problem children” and the “golden children.”

#### **Take a break.**

Shut your ministry down for August to mark the end of one school year and the beginning of another. Use the break to train leaders and to rest. The rest and the new energy at startup are valuable.

Take a personal retreat to reflect on the past year or two of ministry. If you determine that you are called to youth ministry, but are distant from kids, consider asking for a few months or some weeks and pull back to do something completely different. Learn something new. Travel. Do whatever refreshes you. Then jump back in and love those kids with as much Christ-like sacrifice as grace allows.

#### **Distribute the joy and the grief.**

If you find yourself unable to bear the weight of persistent loss, get some folks on your team to share the weight of it. You cannot pastor every child. Build a team of leaders who you can talk to and who understand the loss of graduates. Talk to other youth workers about it. Encourage one another to press into new relationships.

#### **Meditate on Philippians 2.**

What would leaving the safe places of your life to move into relationship with your family look like for you? The leaders you work with? The kids in your group? Talk about it with your senior pastor or mentor. How have you withdrawn over the last few years? Do you see a distance forming? Is it a life pattern or just a ministry pattern? Meditate on **Philippians 2** in such a way that you may love as Christ loves – without fear.

A girl talked about her time at a sorority. As she talked, I began to see the pain within her. She spoke of regret and of all the shallow things she chased until she finally encountered a ministry on campus and learned about the unwavering love of God. I have never forgotten the pain in her voice during that conversation.

As a product of a college campus ministry I have a passion to limit that tone of sorrow. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our students could leave college without a bag of regrets? We spend hours practicing for worship singing, days preparing youth group programs, and weeks preparing for summer mission trips. But, how many of us actually prepare kids for college?

Every good driver knows that if you need to change lanes to arrive at your destination, the sooner you know the easier it is to get over. So, if you want to prepare this year's seniors then the time to start is now. Here are some ideas for improving your students' "merge." Start with one and then build from there.

#### Look Both Ways

Don't limit your students by only pushing Bible college. There is nothing wrong with Bible college, but you must be realistic. Most of your students will end up at local colleges or universities. Too many students go to college with no connection to the Body and just wither and die. Check out local churches and campus ministries. Get to know their ministers and have them visit your youth group. That way when a student says, "I am going to University so-and-so" you can reply, "That's great! Remember Tom? He spoke at youth group last year. Here is his number." Students start thinking about college early, so get them thinking about their "post" youth group Christian life.

#### Check the Rearview Mirror

When you merge in traffic, you have to look behind you before you can go forward. Encourage your seniors to reflect on the past four years. That

process can help prepare them for the next four years. During the spring semester have a "Seniors Youth Group." Your seniors can help plan the entire youth group. Have each graduate speak about how they have grown in their spiritual walk over the past four years. What would they change? What helped them the most? You might want to meet with them to guide them about what they want to impart to the youth group they are leaving.

#### School Zone Ahead

The summer after graduation is a great time to help students prepare for leaving for school in the fall. Nothing gets kids going more than a challenge. Sometime during the summer meet with each senior—or if you have many students, have their small group leaders meet with them. You've been building a relationship with these kids for four years; use that knowledge to challenge them specifically. For some students, the challenge will be something small while others will be ready for a more serious challenge. The point is to push them to go further.

#### Lane Ends

Fall equals follow up. The fall is the most important time for new college students. That is when they join clubs, make friends, and start deciding who they want to be. Don't let your students forget where they came from. Send each student a care package full of snacks, pens, note cards, and other goodies that a college kid might enjoy. Most importantly, include notes from your youth group. You also might want to remind them of the goals they set. Finally, contact them at least once by either giving them a call or, if distance permits, going to visit. You want to make sure they are connected to a Christian community. The bittersweet news is that this is where the lane ends. Your students can always come home to visit, but your primary leadership role has reached its final destination.

# Caution: Lanes Merging

*We were sitting around a table with friends reminiscing about college, telling funny memories and stories you might (or might not) tell your grandkids.*

By

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## *We spend an amazing amount of energy staying connected with students during their middle and high school years.*

Some youth leaders spend as much, if not more, energy trying to keep college students connected to church life – others forget about the students shortly after graduation. In both cases, churches see a mass exodus of students from local church ministries shortly after graduation.

Can we reverse the trend? Can we keep students involved in our local churches or at least keep them involved in ministries at college?

Maybe.

Students who were active in church during their high school years and fell off the map during their college and early adult lives will likely return after they get married and have children. If they continue to have a connection with the ministry they were a part of during their younger years, I think the likelihood of them returning is even greater.

Enter social networking!

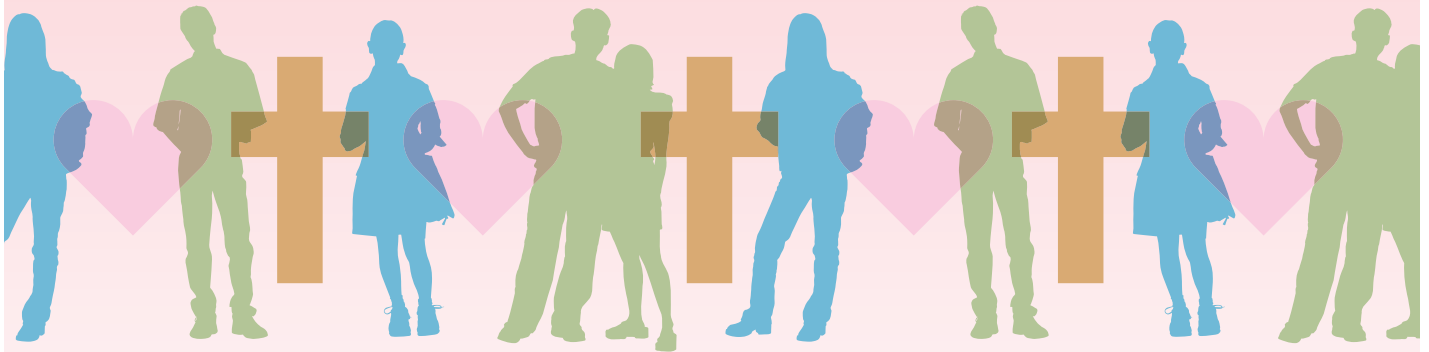
Social networking websites (okay – let's not kid ourselves, I'm really talking about Facebook and not much about any other sites) provide an excellent

opportunity to stay in touch with college age students and young adults during their "absent years" from church. If you're not connected with Facebook, sign up, log on, and start connecting with those college students and young adults you might not have seen or heard from in awhile. Most (if not all!) of them are already connected with hundreds of friends on Facebook.

Some ways to stay connected:

- Sign up at [facebook.com](http://facebook.com)
- Connect with students (it takes a remarkably short time for folks to find you!)
- Create a group for students from your youth ministry.
- Wish them Happy Birthday on their birthday.
- Have a "Facebook meet-up" at a specific time online.
- Post memorable (and appropriate!) youth group memory photos on your Facebook group.
- Never post anything in any electronic format that you wouldn't want your mother to see or read.
- Don't remind college students to be appropriate online. You're staying connected to them, but you're not the Facebook police.
- Continue to be supportive, invitational, and demonstrative (big word, eh?) of God's unconditional love.

Did I mention Twitter? I probably should have. You may want to keep an eye out for that site, too!



# Social Networking: A Tool To Stay In Touch During The "Absent Years"

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# Apples Don't Belong In The Freezer

## Senior Wisdom From Freshmen

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Each year I invite the previously graduated class out to breakfast sometime during Christmas break. Generally, they are all back in town and eager to reconnect with their old friends. Seeing the college sweat-shirts they wear, how many tattoos they have, and what their first real beard looks like, is fun. (And that is just the ladies!) During this breakfast we catch up on life. I give them my update on family, friends, the town, and the youth group. They tell me about their roommates and how they learned about the bus system in their college town when they were stranded somewhere at 2:30 in the morning.

Toward the end of the conversation I ask, "If you could go back to yourself in your senior year of high school, what would you tell yourself?" Besides the chuckles and eye

rolls, this leads into some very rich conversation. Hindsight is 20/20 after all!

At the other end of the table during one of those breakfasts was a quiet young lady who had been a faithful part of our youth ministry. She was (and still is) an amazing soccer player. She lived in the dorms during her first year of college and had used much of the money that she had to buy some good fruit to eat. Dorm food was getting to her. The fruit was ripening much faster than she could eat it, so she decided to store some of it in the only place that she could imagine would slow down the aging process: the freezer. She shared with the group that the biggest thing she learned while she was away at college was that, "Apples don't belong in the freezer." I enjoyed her use of the word, "belong." Her statement

made me realize that this rich wisdom, including fruit preservation tactics, needed to be captured and shared with the classes to come.

From there it has been my goal and obsession to get as much information as I could from college freshmen. The life experience that these students in college have cannot be replicated anywhere else. They are in the thick of it, and what they are learning will change how you minister to your present group of students.

Here is what I recommend you do: set aside some money right now (or put it in your budget for the future) to host this kind of breakfast. Tell this year's graduating seniors to contact you when they come home from college for Christmas. I usually do this meal sometime in the week between

Christmas and New Years. Most people are around and not swamped with family, shopping, or travel – so you will get the most bang for your buck. Offer a free breakfast to someone who takes good notes and have him or her come to capture what those students share. You will not want to be scribing the whole time. Allow the students to guide the conversation and finish up with that famous question that I posed to the students: "If you could go back to yourself in your senior year of high school, what would you tell yourself?"

Allow what you learn to change you and your ministry. Learn from their wisdom, but also don't take anything too personally. As I said, hindsight is 20/20!

*I sat in the circle, twenty-seven years old, two years out of seminary, only a few years into my first full-time youth ministry position.*



People in ministry know about the circle. The circle is where you often sit with other ministry teammates. In the circle, you go around and share. On this day we were sharing, or more correctly, presenting our ministries. The assignment of the moment, "Tell us about your youth ministry."

What youth pastor/leader, to some degree, has not dreaded this time? In these conversations we hear about the amazing things God is doing at other churches while we fidget, knowing the reality of our ministry, and wonder if we are the right person for the job after all.

Whenever we sit in the "circle", we tend to compare. But when we compare, we lose. We either become proud, or we wallow in martyrdom.

The root of this problem is usually found in our need to be successful. We want others to know we are capable and have something great to offer. If we cannot present a positive front, our biggest temptation is to then produce a successful "spin."

What is your definition of "success" in youth ministry? Is success having a full youth room on

Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings? Is it having the biggest group at your winter camp? Is it having growing and active small groups with students who carry a Bible/notebook and are eager to learn? What do you talk about when people ask you to describe your youth ministry? What would cause you to feel like your youth ministry is effective?

Our descriptions, lists, and profiles mostly focus on the "here and now." For too many years, I defined my success only in terms of temporary fruit. I believed if youth said they wanted to follow Christ and were actively living their faith that we had succeeded and could now move to the next "project." I also believed the inverse of those kids who rebelled and made a stand against participating in the youth ministry and following Christ. This thinking, I now understand, was shortsighted. We limit ourselves with "small picture" thinking while God is only interested in the "big picture."

After twenty-nine years of youth ministry there are many times I feel that I know less than when I started, but one thing I do know: there is a "long view" to youth ministry. Keeping my eyes on a

teenager beyond high school into adulthood gives me a greater glimpse of God's perspective.

Here are three tentative conclusions (with accompanying comments) I have made which helps me navigate a healthy evaluation of success and failure in my own ministry:

**This is not my ministry.**

My role is to be a faithful servant/shepherd and to offer opportunities for youth to begin a relationship with Christ, grow in their faith, and serve Him. I cannot make anybody do these things or be a Christian. God completes the work as people choose to follow Him.

**There are many different scenarios in the faith journey of youth.**

- Youth may be great Christians throughout their time in the youth ministry but reject it in the college years.
- Youth may be growing Christians through middle school and reject it in high school.
- Youth may not follow Christ at all through their teen years, but come to Him later in life.



- Youth may do one of the first two scenarios and come back to the Lord in college or later in life.

No program or even a fully invested relationship can guarantee the path of a teenager in his or her relationship with the Lord. What works for one may not work for another. We are all different, and we have the freedom to choose to follow the Lord. We must accept these different journeys as a part of the youth ministry profile and remember this is God's ministry.

**Long view = Hope view**

Opening my eyes wide to the possibilities of God's work in a person's life, at any time, offers me a whole new frame of reference to assess the "successes and failures" of ministry. I have learned after all these years (twenty-five of them in the same ministry) to never give up hope.

Some will measure their success by how many former students are now in full-time ministry, missions, etc. To hear them speak of those youth we would naturally guess they were active, growing Christians in their teen years; carefully groomed and nourished through the loving investment of youth leaders. However, over half of our youth who now serve God full-time in ministry or missions were not even Christians through most of their adolescent years!

The next time you sit in the "circle" and wait for your turn, in the moments that you are tempted to second guess your "success" – may God remind you that His work is not yet done. May He affirm in you the passion to continue your walk with youth beyond high school graduation into the rest of their lives.

# The Long View

# Calling Doctor Youth Leader



I am suffering from the debilitating effects of a horrid disease. It's one that most people get at least once in their lives, although it is my third case.

It affects their performance, ability to complete tasks, sleeping habits, and many other aspects of daily life. What is it?

Senioritis.

Bad me affecting is it! (See, it's even messing up some of my writing ability.) As I finish up my master's degree, I've gotten to the point where I don't care so much about getting an A as I do about getting a P. Performing acceptably is a lot more tempting than performing exceptionally.

Senioritis is tough, and most likely you have students in your youth group who are dealing with the disease right now. They have one semester of high school left and are looking forward to walking across a stage, taking their diploma, and

saying "¡Adios!" to this chapter of their lives. They can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and the last thing they want to think about is papers, quizzes, homework, or finals. They're more excited about graduation parties, gifts, senior trips, and the "freedom" of life after high school.

Oh, they're also not too interested in sitting in youth group with a bunch of "young kids" doing and hearing the same thing they've been doing and hearing for the past four years. That's why the second semester of the senior year is the hardest time to keep kids active in the group. So, what do you do? Here are four concepts to think about:

**1. For Seniors Only:** Seniors are beginning to break away from high school and eagerly await the prospects of college or career. Things that were awesome six months ago are now considered juvenile or boring. So, what do you do? While you can't always provide a separate class or activity just for seniors, you can have a group study on life skills and the Bible for them. Have senior-only fellowships or day trips. Give them special opportunities that...

**2. Make Them Important:** Notice, I didn't say, "Make them feel important." You need to make them important. They have achieved a noble goal in graduating from high school. That achievement needs to be celebrated and honored. Also, keep in mind that seniors in your youth ministry have been taught for almost six years now. Give them some leadership responsibilities in the youth ministry that they can get excited about. Making them important will create good...

**3. Memory Makers:** Help seniors build memories from within the youth ministry. The past years of the ministry have already built some memories, but the senior year can have some meaningful memories of its own. The typical robe ceremonies and picture slideshows are a good start. Give them something more to look forward to – like a senior adventure, when you take the seniors on a trip or retreat that incorporates fun with life experience and wisdom for their new start. The trip should...

**4. Encourage Them:** The senior year is a time full of questions. Your students are making some of the most important decisions of their lives: Where should I go to college? Do I

go to college? Do I get married? Do I get a job? How do I pay for college? Can I handle being far from home? Why is my voice still cracking at 18? This is a difficult time. Be available to your youth and encourage them along the way. Offer them wisdom when they need it, and speak God's love into their lives. Life for them is a little uncertain right now. Give them some encouragement.

Senioritis is tough. But, it's something that everyone eventually gets over—well, almost everyone. Help your students enjoy their senior year, while being responsible along the way. It will make some great opportunities for sharing and ministering as you see them make this transition into "real life."

YOU may be just what the doctor ordered!

Avoiding  
the Ultimate

# Dropout



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## Many evangelical watchdogs are sounding alarms concerning a disappointing type of college dropout: those dropping out of the Christian faith the moment they hit their university campuses.

“Dropping out” of the Christian faith raises all kinds of theological questions, so I will begin by affirming that I have a strong personal conviction about the doctrine of eternal security. I believe that born-again person can never be lost or un-born, and I respect my Christian brothers and sisters who see it differently.

But here’s the point: many students arrive on college campuses each year only to walk away from the very faith that once gave them guidance. While many will return to church involvement later in life, even a temporary hiatus can involve grave earthly consequences related to their future hopes and dreams. How can we help nurture a faith that remains strong even in the face of the pressures of college and young adult life?

### Be theologically rich in your teaching ministry.

I am surprised at the way I often underestimate the capacity of students to comprehend and apply deep truths of Scripture. With ready-made resources offering to supplement our supposed lack of time for prep and study, we are tempted to allow the canned resources to replace our pursuit of study, meditation, and reflection on the Scriptures. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve thanked God more than once for resources like the one you’re reading now when I’m pressed for time or need something cool for supplement. But, a shepherd cannot guide the flock of God to places where he or she has never been.

Theological richness stems from your personal growth with God. Are you growing in both your cerebral AND experiential understanding of God? Students can sense when you’re talking from personal passion and experience versus having read someone’s idea out of a book. Even when you use some of the great pre-written material available, your ambition should be to make it your own. Wrestle with it, think through it, and tweak it until you believe what you’re teaching and are ready to live it out.

### Be honest about your own struggles with doubt.

We’ve communicated to students that “doubt” is the enemy of faith. However, I believe that apathy is the real enemy of faith. Giving up is what quenches the fire of faith. Sharing openly about the questions you’ve struggled with and how you came to various resolutions can go a long way in assuring students that true faith is not the opposite of doubt – but the opposite of apathy. When a student becomes confused and then ceases to care and gives up, he or she is a prime target for believing a false message. That message may come in the form of secular humanistic philosophy or a false religious system or something else – but come it will – and students need to know how to let doubt become a friend to their faith instead of a foe that leads to apathy.

Just this morning my wife and I awoke to one of the best text messages we could ever have received. It simply read: “*Sunday the 4th of January, I accept Jesus Christ as my savior. I ask him to be a part of my life and in my heart – Mary.*” The reason for our joy is obvious, but even more so when you know something of Mary’s story. My wife has been Mary’s small group leader for two years. Mary comes to our youth gatherings regularly and is someone to whom faith has not come easy. She is a skeptic, a doubter, and someone we’ve consistently loved and shared the Gospel with since we met her. She always told us how she felt ashamed to come to God because of her doubt.

When my wife explained that God is not afraid of her honesty, but rather pleased by it, and that Jesus prioritized the object of faith (Himself) over the amount of faith (i.e. the mustard seed parable), Mary began to take baby steps. She now realizes that, like Thomas, God won’t reject her as she wrestles with questions.

### Realize that apologetics is still important – but also changing.

I am a natural skeptic, and early on God used the writings of many classic apologists from C.S. Lewis to Francis Schaeffer to Josh McDowell to help solidify my faith. But in addition to evidential apologetics we need to engage in experiential apologetics. Students need to know not only that Christianity is *true* – but also that it *works*.

It works when it’s keeping us from sin and its consequences. And it works when we fall into sin and face its consequences. It works to bring peace among enemies and it works to bring peace in the soul. It works in being realistic about the present and it works to bring hope regarding the future. It works to rescue the soul from the grip of Hades and it works to rescue the body from the grip of poverty. As theology moves from the classroom to the laboratory – as kids have the opportunity to both witness and participate in the “living out” of faith – they are much more likely to embrace Jesus as the holistic answer to all life’s complexities and not simply view him as a “Get out of hell free” card (as important as that is).

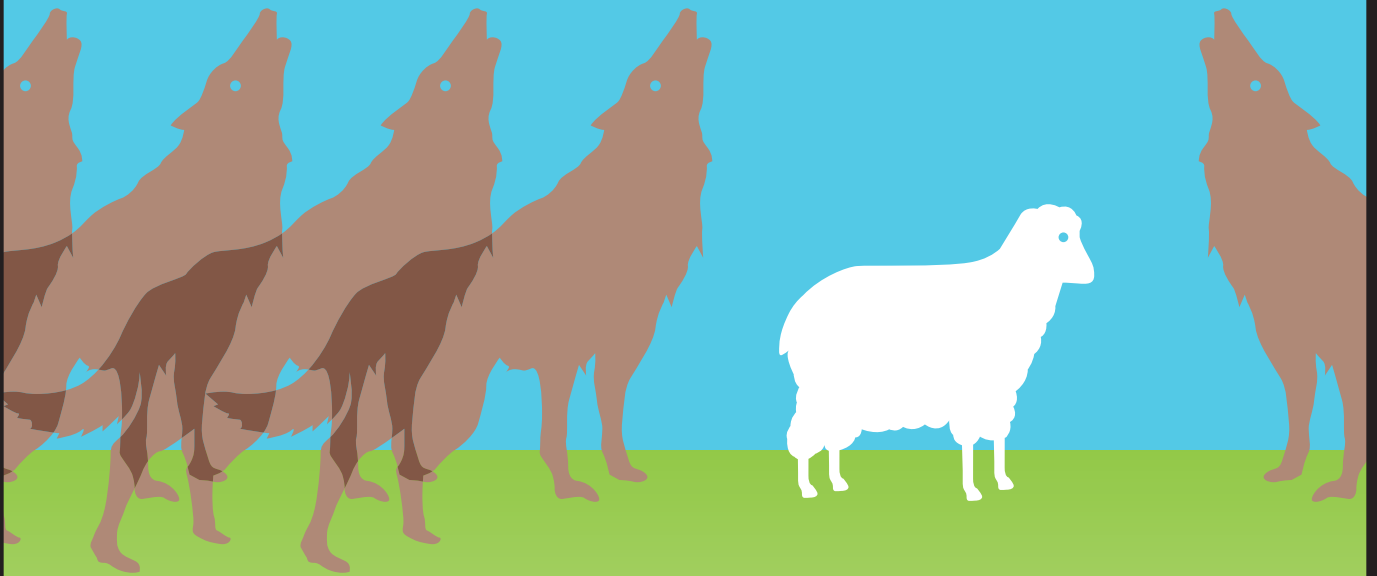
### Partner with Parents.

I am amazed at how many youth workers want little or nothing to do with parents. This is one of the great scandals of modern youth ministry. Even non-believing parents want their kids to be solid, healthy, productive members of society. Make your priority to be even MORE available to parents than you are to students. When they walk into the room, acknowledge them. Invite their involvement in any way possible or appropriate. Offer gatherings and training for them. Talk to them about specific struggles they face in the raising of their kids. This will not only earn you much credibility in their eyes, but will keep your finger on the pulse of the home life, enabling you to minister with greater wisdom and sensitivity.

John was a likeable kid who I wished would sign up for one of our camps – but he never would. He was friendly, quirky, and a bit immature for his age – but very loveable. Finally, after getting to know John’s dad over a cup of coffee, I was made aware that John’s biological mother had severely abused him as a younger child. Because of this background, John struggled with a few behavioral difficulties that made his dad nervous about sending him away overnight. My new compassion for John and his dad led me to arrange for a handful of male leaders to be brought into the inner circle of awareness so that they could effectively monitor and minister to John – and next month, as a senior in high school, he will be heading to winter camp with us for the very first time!

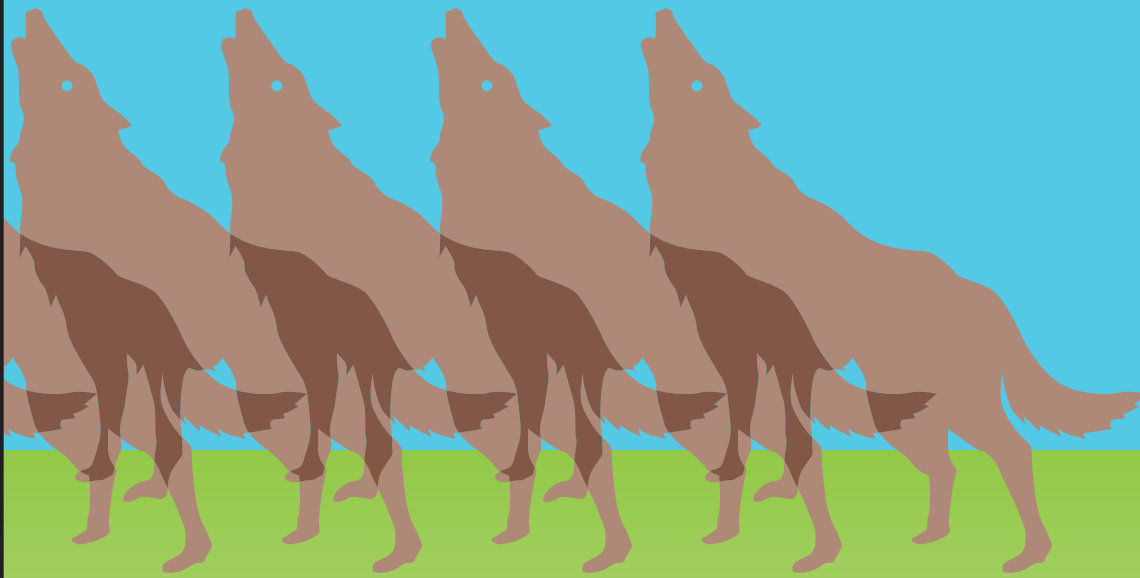
So be encouraged! You ARE making a difference! That appointment you recently squeezed in to make time for somebody; that extra ten minutes you spent to pray with that student; that late night conversation after they had blown it, it’s all working to remind your students that Christianity is not only true – it works.

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# Sheep Among Wolves

I remember my first days of college. The freedom was exhilarating. Who decided when bedtime was? I did.



Who determined when to work on homework? Me. Who made the decision between Chinese and Mexican for dinner? I was the one. As that year went on, though, I learned that the decisions I faced were more and more difficult. They bore consequences that were not easily resolved.

Every young man and woman goes through this same experience at some point. Some are more prepared than others, which is evident in their routines and practices. We have a part in helping students get ready for the passage into adulthood. With graduation only a short time away, we send them out as sheep among wolves. **Matthew 10** offers some ways to aid our students in their transition. They'll need to continue their ministry and training in a local church. Simplicity needs to be a part of their beginning. They will also need to live in wisdom and innocence.

Jesus gave specific instructions to His disciples as He sent them out. His first was to stick to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Those people were the ones who shared a worldview, a culture, and

a religion with the disciples. His guys would find an audience there. For our students, becoming a part of a church gives them a chance to share their own experiences with like-minded people. We need to help our students put what we've been teaching them into practice without overwhelming them. If they are going off to college, there are student groups of all denominations where they can serve too. The military has chaplains and church services. Wherever your students have chosen to go, encourage them to remain a part of the church.

Jesus also gave the instruction to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. The disciples were practicing their developing gifts, living out the gospel. Encouraging our students to be a part of a church will enable them to find new teachers and mentors to help them discover, develop, and utilize the gifts and ministries God has prepared for them. Jesus himself told the disciples that they would do greater things than He did. We should bear a similar message to our students. They should move beyond being

our students to becoming our fellow laborers.

The next set of instructions from Jesus dealt with what the disciples needed to carry. They were to take no money, no extra change of clothing, and no protection. Their provisions would come from God through His people. His instructions may seem strange to us, but we would do well to help our students learn to live simply, to trust God for all things. Dorms, barracks, and first apartments tend to be small. Simple living frees up space. Simple living also frees up space in the soul. Jesus talked about the difficulty that wealth creates when He spoke about the camel going through the eye of a needle. When students acquire more and more possessions in an attempt to make their lives convenient, they also accumulate more responsibility. The result is quite the opposite of what was intended. Competing with the world increases the burden we carry, limiting our ability to give and serve and minister to that world.

Within the remainder of His instructions, Jesus described the disciples

as "sheep among wolves." He warned that families would be split over Him. He even told them that peace was not what He came to set forth. As a matter of fact, He brought a sword. The most important thing we can give our students as they move on we should have already given them. Jesus directed His disciples, and us, to be "wise as serpents" yet "innocent as doves." Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The rest comes from living in His presence. Innocence, as well, is a product of a relationship with Christ. We are sending our students into a world that sees Christians as hypocrites, liars, elitists, fools—and sometimes, enemies. Our lives and those of our students need to be living examples of grace, mercy, and love.

If we have been the light of Christ to our students, they will see why He is the way, the truth, and the life. Wisdom will be imparted. Innocence will be a way of life. As we congratulate our graduating seniors and see them off, let's help them stay faithful, live simply, and do what they've been taught.