

CHAPTER 3: The Role of Adults in Student Leadership

Mick believes student leaders are absolutely essential players in reaching teenagers for Christ. He also thinks his role is to “ride herd” on the most mature students to help them maximize ministry effectiveness. On the other hand, Emily believes that we adults have exercised unnecessary control in youth ministry. If students are going to grow as leaders, she is convinced they need to be exposed to, not protected from, the pressures, obligations, and frustrations of leadership. Emily sees herself as a resource for enterprising teenagers. Mick is a coach, developing talent. Who’s right?

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, as a result of either our research findings or the clear teaching of Scripture, we could list the three things adults need to do in order to produce student leaders who are mature, faithful, and effective in evangelism?

It’s not that simple.

But we have found a nice overlap between biblical disciple-making principles and what our research surfaced about the roles adults ought to play in student-leadership development. Maybe both Mick and Emily are right. We’ll learn in this chapter that adults need to be on their toes as they relate to their student leaders. While it might be a real stretch to ask adults to be flexible, our conclusions are pretty clear. We need to be alert if we will provide the responsive, person-centered disciple-making that leads to effective student leadership. As you consider the following four disciple-making principles, be sure to note how our research spotlights at least one dimension of how the modern practice of student leadership--in its most effective form--captures timeless truth from God’s Word.

(Published June 2000, currently out-of-print • Posted as a free Cadre resource with permission August 2008)

Be Clear Enough to Be Intentional

This principle has been developed in some depth throughout the first two chapters. Adults must have a clear vision of the outcome they are seeking through student leadership if they are to focus their energies productively. Building from the previous chapter, our focus ought to be on making disciples of each individual in our sphere of influence, recognizing that student leaders emerge out of such a faithful process. When Dann Spader, Sonlife's founder, teaches his seminars, he often uses the imagery of popcorn kernels popping to describe how we might identify these emerging leaders.

Notice how different this process is from management-informed approaches to recruiting and screening students for leadership. Under that way of thinking, youth workers send out a wide invitation to teenagers, get responses on lengthy application forms, check references, and conduct probing interviews. Even when it's done thoroughly, that process can't possibly compete with what we learn about students while making disciples.

We hope these four principles of disciple-making might shed some light on the ways our Lord assembled his original "student leader" team. Let's start by taking a close look at the original mandate for making disciples.

The sole command in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is to make disciples. "Go," "baptizing," and "teaching them to obey" are used to modify that command. We need to see disciple-making as a task not just for the specialists, but for us all. Somehow we adult youth leaders must focus not only on the task in our ministry to teenagers; we must also pass it on to them. They, too, are obligated to help make disciples.

Most translations of the Great Commission imply that we're commanded to go to other locations--like missionaries overseas--in order to make disciples. This might have been true if the participle "going" (perhaps more accurately understood as "while going") was used instead of the imperative "go." We don't mean to say it's not important to travel to faraway places to serve the Lord, if that's where we're called. But this passage simply doesn't teach that. Instead it affirms the obligation of disciple-making as a way of life for all of us.

One of the great joys for all ministers is when their disciples use opportunities in their natural life-arenas to make other disciples. "While going" is as natural as it gets. When Joel wanted to reach others for Christ, it only made sense for him to start a Bible study with other guys on the basketball

team. We've got to help our student leaders develop deep, transformational contacts with others as part of the normal ebb and flow of their lives. Isn't it clear that they will have at least some advantages over adults when it comes to this avenue of teenager ministry? The youth culture is where a student leader's natural life journey takes place. We adults need to be deliberate and courageous when we cross bridges to hang out in the "land of the teenager." As we'll see later, there may be good reasons for adults to take such journeys.

"Baptizing" points to the incorporative goal of disciple-making, reminding us that when we help people become who God wants them to be, we must bring them into the family of believers united under Jesus' lordship. The small groups we observed in our research often facilitated depths of body-accountability in the lives of the best student leaders. Jason, Thad, Shea, and Jordan cite their weekly small-group Bible study with Nate as the most important ingredient in their Christian growth, largely because they have been able to be honest with one another. They experience a sense of gospel partnership through such a group. Doesn't it seem that Christian brothers and sisters who are most like us will best handle the accountability portion of our participation in the body of Christ? People "like us" are less easily dismissed when they remind us of our obligations to Christ. The boys identified above would agree that it's a good idea for student leaders to meet with their friends on a regular basis.

"Teaching them to obey" is an agenda much too large to be carried solely by the Bible experts among us. We're not saying it's not important for adults to teach the Bible to student leaders. In fact, we've found that this is a key role for adults to play in the development of student leaders. But Scripture suggests that we can learn a lot about how to obey by taking a long look at the little children around us (Matthew 18:3). Our obedience is worked out in the various situations of our individual lives--our family dinner tables, recreational softball leagues, class breaks, and endless other situations. The most effective teaching for that kind of obedience is a form of life-coaching, or showing each other how to live. There are lots of biblical "one anothers," making it clear that God expects us to teach each other naturally, "while going." Students will discover the courage needed to be people of integrity because they see their friends stand straight when it's easier to cave in. These student-leader models often aren't flashy, but they certainly are effective. They also line up nicely with one of the major ways the New Testament instructs us to teach one another.

Adults should be clear-minded about how the first goal of student leadership is to develop these exceptional teenagers into mature and faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The task of peer evangelism will flow naturally from student leaders' healthy relationships with the Lord. Teenage evangelism is, after all, *their* assignment.

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Be Caring Enough to Inspire

Have you ever wondered how this personal commitment thing works with kids? What forces are at work when someone decides to follow Christ-in-you? It's fascinating to see how Jesus inspired his dedicated following by first of all offering his life and example to his disciples. He pioneered a servant-leader selflessness that won the hearts of his team. He shared every part of his life with the twelve, and by doing so, imprinted an example that would forever stamp the love of God in their lives.

In our research we were able to listen to groups discuss their motivation for becoming student leaders. The teenagers in our study repeatedly identified the inspirational example of the youth worker in leading the group. These adults were out front, showing their teenagers what was expected. In fact, our research team commented frequently that a youth ministry seemed to take on the personality of its youth worker. These adults were clear in their ministry philosophies, operated confidently with their leadership teams, designed the programs for the groups, and created the atmosphere for youth-ministry gatherings. And they were deeply appreciated for their efforts.

Students who indicated that the youth minister was most helpful to their personal faith sharing (22.5 percent) came from homes where evangelism was most likely never being modeled. In fact, 80 percent of the students surveyed had either never or seldom seen a parent tell someone else about Christ. Only 3.5 percent cited their parents as most influential in their efforts to share their faith with others. While this may not mean their parents didn't do evangelism, it does mean students weren't seeing it. It's significant to note that these students were being asked, as student leaders, to engage in a Christian practice they had not grown up observing as a value in their parents' lives, even though the majority of them had grown up in Christian homes.

Those few students who cited parents as the most helpful to their efforts in peer outreach reported seeing their parents share their faith with their friends almost monthly. For these students, those windows of observation played a huge role in helping them reach their friends for Christ.

The impact of modeling, done so powerfully by Jesus among his disciples, is reflected even more significantly in another of our findings. Those student leaders who saw an adult (non-parent) share his or her faith with someone weekly or more often themselves reported helping more than eight friends make a commitment to Christ. If the chance to see adults in evangelism dropped to just monthly, then the student leaders most likely helped fewer of their friends (four to eight) make a commitment to Christ. Our research showed this to be a consistent trend. The more often adults were observed sharing their faith with others, the more often student leaders shared their faith with their own friends. When adults engaged in observable evangelism practices less frequently, student leaders followed their pattern. So those students who reported seeing adults only occasionally--if at all--doing evangelism also were likely to indicate that they hadn't helped anyone come to Christ.

One final word needs to be said about the impact of modeling before leaving this significant research finding. Students who saw other students lead peers to Christ were dramatically more effective in their own evangelism efforts than those who didn't benefit from such examples. Of the students who had helped friends make commitments to Christ, 85 percent said they had seen an adult do so, and 85 percent of those students had seen a teenager help another teenager come to Christ. All the students who were in the most effective category in helping friends commit to Christ had seen other teenagers help friends come to Christ. Student leaders who are effective in evangelism certainly follow modeled behavior.

So which is it? Should adults model evangelism or should teenagers? Yes! As crucial as it is for adults to model outreach, it is equally important that they do so with an eye toward developing models who ultimately will prove most influential: student leaders.

After such encouraging reports, you might be surprised to learn that even the top student leaders identified fear as the number one obstacle to their evangelism efforts. Fear can undermine even the sharpest youth worker's planning and training. James shared in an interview what it would have taken to "open the door" to share his faith with a peer. He was fearful because he didn't want to alienate the friend and be rejected. He went on to list all the evangelism training in which he had participated with his youth ministry. "At every monthly meeting we go out to share in teams. Once you learn how to share, it's your own [your faith becomes your own]." Later in the interview, James described the role a mission trip had played in his life. "I learned how to serve. I

love being behind the scenes.” This student had skills and experience, and he had seen others share their faith with friends, but had never personally played a key role in helping a friend come to Christ. The main obstacle for him was his fear.

While it’s important to teach students how to explain their faith, adults would be wise to devise ways that help student leaders move past their fears of sharing Christ with others. Simply challenging teenagers to become overcomers through inspirational talks are likely as short-lived as a coach’s locker-room speech at halftime. Initial enthusiasm withers quickly in the face of hulking opponents who want to hurt you. Adults need to choose long-term strategies that help their student leaders acknowledge but not be paralyzed by their fears. We need to recognize that we can very likely help students move through their fears when we model courage ourselves. Kent is one youth worker whose effectiveness as an adult model comes in part because he knows the fear of rejection and won’t let it deter him from doing evangelism. Bravery inspires bravery.

Did you ever wonder how the disciples overcame their fears? We know they had them, yet the contrast between their fearfulness in the Gospels and their boldness in Acts is striking. How powerful it must have been to be eyewitnesses of the greatest act of sacrifice humanity has ever known! They understood the real fears of Jesus reflected in his prayer in Gethsemane the night he was arrested. The Apostle John must have had the image-example of our Lord Jesus in mind when he wrote, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18a).

As we’ll learn in chapter 5, students in our study who seldom invited their friends to talk to adults about Jesus didn’t reach as many of their friends for Christ. When students more frequently invited non-Christian friends to talk to an adult, they were likely to see their friends commit to Christ. These students see adults as partners in their evangelism enterprise, a view no doubt inspired by the loving, sharing initiative visible in these adults’ lives.

There is an intersection of effectiveness that can be explored when our research results are considered in light of biblical truth. Modeling works because it reflects a significant reality about how we learn. It shouldn’t surprise us to see Jesus employing this truth. He appointed the twelve to “be with him” as they learned to preach the gospel (Mark 3:14). Disciples of Jesus are ultimately those people who follow him--and other exemplary models--toward Christlikeness. While it’s clear that Paul wanted to help people copy Christ

(Philippians 2:5), it's important to see that he offered himself as an accessible--though imperfect--pattern to help them on their way (1 Corinthians 11:11; Philippians 3:10-14; 4:9). Paul even gushed about the far-reaching impact of his modeling among the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:5-9). We adults can help inspire such a following by caring deeply for our student leaders. If, like Paul, we "press on" in our own faithfulness to Jesus, the investment we make in teenagers by sharing our very lives with them will help them step up to new--and rewarding--levels of commitment.

Adults should accept the responsibility of being significant, and initial, models of evangelism faithfulness to their student leaders. By doing so, adults will demonstrate how to overcome fear in presenting the gospel and inspire imitation. Eventually, they must be willing to yield the primary modeling responsibility to emerging student leaders who, because of modeling dynamics, will be exponentially more effective at reaching teenagers than adults ever could be. Finally, adults must present themselves as available resources to developing student leaders who exercise initiative by asking their friends to talk to someone other than themselves about Jesus.

Be Close Enough to Inspect

As we adults come alongside our student leaders, we can get an up-close perspective on what they need and are ready for spiritually. Jesus gained such insight with his disciples because he lived with them. He knew, for example, that they weren't ready to deal with the forecast of his upcoming death until they understood better who he really was (Matthew 16:13-21). Peter's reaction demonstrated even then that the Lord still had his work cut out for him in preparing the disciples for what was to come (Matthew 16:22-23). Most of us won't have that kind of "life together" opportunity with our student leaders. What can we do to ensure that we're close enough to inspect their spiritual progress?

Our study showed that regular accountability meetings with adults not only help student leaders grow, they also lead to greater success as students try to influence their friends for Christ. The majority of students who were effective in evangelism met regularly with adults; those who reported having no impact on their friends coming to Christ did not. During these meetings, adults got to know students while offering general guidance in the Christian faith. It was also likely that these mentoring adults would use the time to probe specific areas of student leaders' lives and pray with them. As an aside, we also

found that if students had these same types of meetings with their parents, the impact was not as significant. This may be because the nature of the meetings with parents focused on informal opportunities for nurture and care rather than those more intentional meetings organized to accomplish a youth ministry's focus.

With the exception of those students who had helped more than eight friends make commitments to Christ, youth ministers were rarely the adults identified as leading these one-on-one times. Regardless of the form the mentoring meeting takes, the influence adults have in the lives of the students by meeting with them reportedly helped them to grow in their relationships with Jesus Christ and lead their friends to become Christians.

Notice that the role of these adult "coaches" in the lives of students is focused not on evangelism task performance, but on life growth and accountability. As we discussed in the previous chapter, our focus with student leaders ought to be person-centered disciple-making. This doesn't mean evangelism coaching is not part of this natural accountability structure. On the contrary, students who were coached at least monthly on how to share their faith were dramatically more effective in reaching their peers than those who did not receive such a benefit. However, this evangelism coaching was done in the context of a larger purpose to become faithful in all of life, not just skilled in a particular task.

One of the practical ways "in your life" coaching and life assessment can be launched is through retreats and mission trips. Teenagers in our study consistently identified such time-intensive experiences with adults as real milestones in their Christian life. This should be no surprise. One of the reasons for the effectiveness of wilderness camping and other such events in ministry is that raw experiences help strip away pretense and expose the true depth of one's character. An astute adult walking alongside a young woman who has been sufficiently humbled by a mission trip's challenges is in the best position to see her needs for Christian growth and respond insightfully. Good coaches know their teams well and craft their strategies accordingly.

As we adults draw near to our student leaders, we will inevitably be in a position to influence how they use their time. Should student leaders focus their limited energy on managing and planning youth ministry programs? Our findings suggest that this is a role best left to adults. We are committed to the idea that students ought to be ruthless in their focus, aiming to grow in their maturity and faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Feedback and planning in youth

ministry are important aids to adult leaders, but they shouldn't be the focus of the student-leader team. Most of the groups in our study centered their ministries around a philosophy similar to "Love God, Love Others, Love the Lost." The research team heard different versions of that phrase at quite a few sites. Groups who were highly concerned about honoring God, about their love for each other, and about reaching out to those who didn't know Jesus were effective in reaching others for Christ. This evangelism effectiveness dropped off among those groups who asked their best teenagers to invest themselves in directing the programs of youth ministry.

The truth is that there was virtually no relationship between having students help plan events and any specifically evangelism-related behaviors. Further, program planning seemed unconnected to other spiritual benefits. Helping plan events didn't even correlate with being involved in church in any significant way! If student leaders spend much time planning events, there is less likelihood that they'll fall into the category of student leaders who reach more friends for Christ, pray more, or are more involved in their churches.

So while we adults should always be on the lookout for ways to increase the confidence of our student leaders through responsible delegation, it doesn't follow that program planning and management is a good investment of time for our teenagers. We contribute to the trust bond that exists between us and our student leaders when we provide programming that helps them have confidence that as they invite others, the meetings will be socially safe and relevant to the world where teenagers live.

Let's be clear. We're not advocating that student leaders stay away from programs. But we have to free student leaders from unnecessary, energy-diffusing burdens. We want to help student leaders concentrate their focus. When we ask them to invest significantly in program leadership, we may do so at the expense of their effectiveness in evangelism.

How should student leaders learn what is expected of them? The youth workers in our study took initiative to be clear in communicating those expectations. These adults also used the Bible to teach students what God expects of them. This finding tips us off to yet another key role adults are to play in developing student leaders.

In our study, every group visited reported that adult leaders supplied strong Bible teaching for their student leaders. Not only that, but student leadership was well-organized and purposefully designed to accomplish all the ends described here--including Bible study. The organizational efforts of

these groups were striking. The stable, established structures provided a consistent environment where adult staff and student leaders knew their roles and where effective, purposeful teaching took place on a regular basis.

Was there any pattern to the Bible content learned? We heard three predominant biblical teaching themes from the students in our study as they reported what they had learned from their adult leaders. The first theme was the challenge to demonstrate purity and integrity. They were taught that an obedient life needed to be demonstrated in their friendships, their dating relationships, and their decision-making. A second theme was to urge students to boldly go and share the good news of Christ. It reinforced the reason why these groups were successfully reaching other teenagers. They taught that evangelism is important in a myriad of ways. The third theme was that teenagers should allow God to work in their lives by practicing the kind of self-denial Jesus asked of his followers.

These certainly aren't the only biblical teaching themes worthy of student leadership. In fact, a number of youth workers reported that their teaching focus was on the character of God and how to worship God. They felt it was important to call these core groups of students to be with the One who had called them to reach others. No doubt this reinforces the prayer emphasis we discovered to be so characteristic of fruitful ministries. One youth worker wanted his student leaders to approach this Bible teaching as a time when they

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could "let God continually refine your life."

Sure, adults need to teach student leaders from the Bible, but how should we determine what should be taught? We'll best make those decisions when we're close enough to our student leaders that we can inspect their "gaps" in maturity and faithfulness. Armed with these insights, it's pretty simple to teach toward their most immediate learning needs.

Adults should understand and expand the levels of trust student leaders have for them through weekly coaching-accountability structures, consistent Christ-honoring programs, and confidence-building delegation. In addition, adults should take advantage of experientially powerful events such as retreats and mission trips to observe the learning levels of Christian integration that have taken root in the lives of their student leaders. Finally, adults need to provide a regular diet of instruction from God's Word that will help student leaders grow in their maturity as they grow in understanding biblical truth and God's expectations for their lives.

Be Challenging Enough to Influence

Teams of student leaders can be powerful vehicles to help students more effectively reach their friends for Christ. Significant influence is possible when a group of students is dedicated to impacting their friends and schools for Jesus Christ. In the groups we researched, adult leaders paid close attention to their most important values and then organized structures that effectively held the groups accountable to those values. Obviously, evangelism faithfulness was one such common value among the groups we studied. Forming a core leadership group also seemed to be a crucial part of each group's "master influence plan."

We also noticed that the groups were well-set up to receive and act upon challenges to increase their faithfulness, especially with regard to reaching out to others. Group members seemed to support one another in risk-taking. Creativity was their standard as they brainstormed ways to meet new opportunities for evangelism. They rarely seemed to shrink from the next challenge. For these healthy student-leader teams, the question was seldom "Should we?" but more commonly "How should we?" One group dramatized the liberation of this type of thinking when they asked, "How should we spend a week together in the summer?" rather than assume that they would simply go to the camp they always attended. This openness led them to explore possibilities that included evangelism. By the time their youth director suggested that they should try to influence a small town for Christ by taking their "camp" into the community for a week, the team was eager to respond to the challenge.

Didn't Jesus capture the imagination (and hearts!) of his followers by calling them to great acts of faith? "You give them something to eat," he told the disciples when they wondered if it wasn't time to send the large crowds away so they could grab some grub (Mark 6:37). He invited Peter to join him for a water surface stroll when the brave fisherman showed interest in taking the plunge (Matthew 14:29). Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' wild challenge to radically alter his lifestyle when he announced his new wealth distribution plan at dinner (Luke 19:8). Instance after instance in the Gospels illustrates that Jesus stretched his followers continually, challenging them to become what they never had dreamed possible.

The adults we saw in our study realized how creative challenges powerfully shaped the lives of student leaders. Being clear-minded about their goals;

having inspired trust through their caring, open lives; and knowing their student-leader teams as only people who walk among others can; their challenges were wonderfully placed. They were just far enough out of reach to stretch their teenagers' faith, but not so far that they might discourage responsiveness.

Adult leaders in our study often chose evangelism training methods that felt like such a stretch to the students involved. Kids got bumped out of their comfort zones while learning how important outreach is. Those who seemed to be most effective selected training efforts that would help kids develop their skills in sharing their faith verbally. For most of us, talking to non-Christian friends about Jesus falls into the "challenge zone." It's not surprising that as students grew in their ability to explain to friends how to have a relationship with Jesus, they experienced success in seeing their friends become Christians. Evangelism Explosion and Dare 2 Share were two programs frequently identified by ministries in this research project as vehicles they use to train students in verbal faith-sharing skills. These training efforts--while offered regularly--usually took place at a time distinct from both the main youth meetings and the student-leader team meetings. The success these students and ministries realized in seeing teenagers commit to Christ was significantly attributed to this "extra" training. Calling students to step up to this new level of participation was clearly a challenge.

We shouldn't lose sight of the importance of challenging student leaders to do more (when they aren't doing enough) or to do better (when their effort is poor). If we have a clear picture of what student leaders can become in Christ; if they know we care about them and, therefore, trust us; and if we're close enough to understand what they need most in their next step of growth; it's wrong for us not to seek to influence them. This adult role is well-done--almost naturally done--by those people who help develop students for effective leadership among their peers.

Remember also that Jesus was especially adept at delivering challenges to his disciples through appropriate delegation (he knew what they were ready for) and sensitive problem-posing (he stretched them to expand their understanding, not to embarrass them). We'll be smart if we learn more about our Lord's style as we work with our student leaders.

Adults should stay alert to the transformational power of their student leaders' natural life agenda so they can challenge students to greater depth, provoke students to deeper reflection, and stimulate students to more

thorough integration. It's abundantly clear that this type of influence by adults will not take place if there is not a shared life context that encourages ongoing life accountability.

Our research uncovered some sharply defined roles and activities that wise adults will engage in if they want to be genuinely helpful in equipping students for evangelism effectiveness. Among those insights were the following:

- Adults should model evangelism-related behavior.
- Adults should provide dependable programs of quality.
- Adults should make themselves available to talk with spiritually curious teenagers.
- Adults should teach the Bible.
- Adults should organize student-leader development and evangelism opportunities.
- Adults should train student leaders in evangelism skills.
- Adults should meet at least weekly for accountability with student leaders.

As a further implication, we may need to multiply the number of adults involved in our youth ministries. (For example, very few adults in our study met weekly with more than two student leaders.) These observed activities fit nicely with the four biblical principles of disciple-making used to organize this chapter. Next we'll turn our attention to learning how the most influential student leaders focused their efforts. We're awfully glad that, similar to what we presented in this chapter, the findings of the next three chapters square with timeless biblical truths.

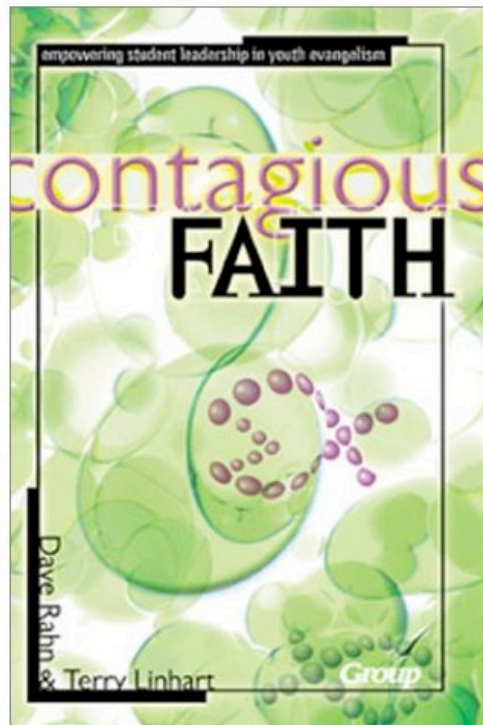
Sorta gives research a holy potential, don't you think?

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Contagious Faith:

Empowering Student Leadership in Youth Evangelism

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(Published June 2000, currently out-of-print • Posted as a free Cadre resource with permission August 2008)