



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

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Youth Ministry
Shepherding -
Offering Direction

Youth Ministry Training **Lesson Sixteen: Youth Ministry Shepherding—Offering Direction**

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Discovering and Practicing Wisdom with Youth
- Challenging Youth through Spiritual Direction
- The Strong Guide: Guiding with Courage

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Understand the nature of spiritual direction
- Identify strategies within spiritual direction for guiding youth through discernment and critical thinking
- Understand how to use spiritual direction as movement toward accountability and discipline
- Begin to plan ways to creatively incorporate and develop skills in youth programming that is associated with spiritual direction

Introduction

In *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, Jim Burns tells us that youth workers today are encountering a “generation of crisis” riddled with pain, abandonment and deep insecurities about themselves and this world. Knowing how to care for youth in ways that will help them lead healthy lives into adulthood will require careful guidance rooted in spiritual direction that is neither weak nor overbearing. Rather, spiritual direction rooted in mutual trust can empower youth to learn to recognize God in the current landscape of their lives. This session presents the nature of spiritual direction as a way to guide and teach youth how to recognize God’s work in their life and in the world.

Lesson Body

Discovering and Practicing Wisdom with Youth

Through spiritual direction we learn to open our mind and hearts to seek, know and understand ourselves, and God. In *Sacred Journey*, Tony Jones summarizes the task of a spiritual director as one who helps the other person listen, discern, interpret and receive God’s voice in their life. If there is a running theme woven in the task of spiritual direction it is the hope that the other will come to know their “belovedness,” and be able to appropriate that belovedness in their daily life. Persons seeking spiritual direction are persons simply seeking spiritual formation. Spiritual formation involves the patient work of slowing down so that we can pay attention to all that is happening in our lives. We must learn to explore our experiences and recognize that our life struggles affect our faith journey. Through spiritual direction we learn to trust in the wisdom and experience others share with us as they listen and help us discern the movements of our lives. We also learn to articulate our journey which involves the process of identifying and naming those things that may be affecting our ability to recognize God.

People offering spiritual direction require just as much discipline and patience. It takes great discipline to guide others to slow down. One must be familiar with the many shortcuts we take, and our tendencies for quick results. It also takes discipline to recognize the movements of God in the lives of others, and careful and patient guidance that allows young people to discover the truths for themselves, rather than always relying on others for easy answers. Ministry is always about preparing others for life beyond the present moment. We should be helping to prepare youth for the various encounters and transitions of adulthood. It takes great restraint and patience to sit and listen to another person without offering advice by discerning when to speak and when to be silent. Youth workers need discernment to know the appropriate stories and elements to share for the benefit of the other person's journey. Persons are at different stages of development and some may not be ready or willing to move beyond. The task of the spiritual director is to help the other discern when they might be ready to move beyond a certain stage which would bring a greater awareness to God's presence.

Challenging Youth through Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction involves the process of critical thinking which is crucial to their emotional and intellectual maturity. Though spiritual direction may sound like a process that only mature adults can participate in, youth greatly desire to be challenged to a deeper level of processing about all that is occurring in their life and God's participation in it.

Spiritual Direction as Presence

The greatest gift we can offer those we lead is the ministry of presence and a deep desire to simply listen to them. Even the smallest child appreciates being taken seriously and many people do children and youth a disservice by not acknowledging the value that their presence and insights might offer us personally, and the ways they might positively help to shape society, faith congregations, societal organizations, movements, culture, and many involvements. As Chap Clark points out in his book *Hurt*, many young people feel that there is no one they can trust because they have experienced abandonment in so many ways by the time they reach the teen years. Adults need to get beyond young people's defenses, recognizing youth will ultimately welcome those who are genuinely open to them. Young people may trust us enough to share their joys, sorrows, dreams and faith journey with us. When this occurs, they are learning to begin to let others speak into their lives, which is a highly developed skill all persons need, and it develops throughout a lifetime. When we share in a young person's journey, the ways we are present and listen will be crucial to our ability to guide them in what they are experiencing.

Spiritual Direction as Decision Making

One of the most common behaviors we will observe in adolescents is a desire and passion to live out their faith. This quality in youth can be quite attractive and contagious. They are wired for high emotions and for expressing their faith. I witness this passion, energy and desire constantly among young adults. Though youth go through unique experiences, young people can and do have the general tendencies in how they deal with questioning, confusion, fear, anger, etc. How we learn to respond, process and receive these experiences in healthy ways requires a choice to

grow beyond what is familiar. When persons begin to seek answers to difficult questions, they begin to move beyond the concrete and experience intellectual and psychological development. Dr. Brad Kelle points out that there are two “Christian Virtues” to be aware of as we guide young persons.

- Moral Courage requires a willingness to establish, defend and enact one’s moral vision and belief.
- “Truthful” Humility describes the ability to recognize one’s finitude and fallibility as well as a willingness to review, reexamine and alter one’s convictions in dialogue with others.

Development passes through predictable, sequential stages similar to physical maturation. Persons can move through three stages with varying changes regarding moral courage and epistemic humility.

Understanding the Movement Toward Complex Commitment

Early and many middle adolescents live with a dualistic understanding of the world where everything is seen in terms of black or white, good or bad, right or wrong. These young people are often convinced that there is one correct answer to every question. They may in fact choose to recognize a diversity of opinions, but assume diversity opinions are illegitimate, explained away by appeal to sin, stubbornness, sloppy scholarship, stupidity, etc. These young people may even express a disdain for the language of “interpretation.”

Adolescents in the stage of plurality may accept diversity as a part of life but in a despairing way. The youth may perceive all knowledge and values, including one’s authority, as contextual and relativistic. Diversity is no longer a problem to overcome; rather diversity represents simply the way things are in their minds. It is common in this stage for the person to scorn the old dualistic self. In this stage of development, relativism and moral ambiguity reign in many areas of life and thought and the person now experiences epistemic humility, the ability to acknowledge one’s own social conditioning and potential for error. In this stage, moral courage may also largely be absent.

Complex Commitment describes the most critical stage because a person can choose to live with an understanding and acceptance of plurality yet making real commitments toward moral courage. Persons begin making new and more cautious commitments in the midst of complexity. The person now acknowledges the need for continuous ethical reflection with a spirit of “truthful” humility as they now realize that commitment is an ongoing, unfolding activity through which we can express our faith. In this stage, the person experiences both “truthful” humility and moral courage in both their intellectual and moral reflection and decision-making. As we consider these stages we should point out that persons can move through to the final stage in one area of their life, while remaining in the pluralistic stage in other areas.

Decision making arises particularly during moments of transition. People are able to move from one stage to another only when the previous stage no longer “works” for them. Youth experience these transitions as emotionally difficult, and resistance to growth can be common. Kelle points

out that the need for moral courage since, as Christians, we have to believe some things. Ambiguity and complexity demand epistemic humility, but Christian faith and love also demand moral courage. The key to learning is to be able to make decisions even while understanding the complexity of issues, and knowing that perhaps later our stance may change but that this is where we currently stand.

Spiritual Direction as Discernment

If one of the greatest gifts we can offer youth is our presence and an attentive listening then one of the greatest tools as spiritual guides is our ability to use questions to guide the process of discernment. The questions asked are discerning questions; questions that are revealing and that lead the other person to discover for themselves the landscape, the longings, the motivations, and the Spirit guiding them in a direction. This will take time to learn since we are so accustomed to offering youth answers. But this work becomes easier the more we are familiar with this work in our lives.

As youth begin to take seriously the role of reflection and awareness, they are empowered to make better and wiser decisions in their life. Though sometimes helpful, it is not enough to simply teach them simple lessons that will help them get through the next week. As youth workers, we must teach them life-transforming truths they can grow into and that help them develop discerning skills they can use into adulthood. Today's youth seem to face more choices as they face more opportunities than ever before. Many cultures are moving at such a fast pace that it is growing difficult to slow down long enough to reflect on our lives, much less the growing choices we all face.

The process of learning to choose well is simply the process of discernment. Discernment is partnering with God as we search for and practice wisdom in every area of our lives. As youth workers, teaching discernment is valuable because it empowers youth by teaching them that they have the potential to solve issues and problems in their own life. The verb "to discern" comes from the Latin verb "*discernere*," which means "to separate, to distinguish accurately one object from another." Discernment involves the ability to differentiate and thus involves critical thinking. To think critically means that we are able to consider all the factors with an open mind, and to ask questions about the implications of a situation and about a decision. While we may already be biased, it involves an openness to weigh all the options. It involves analyzing, interpreting and evaluating all of the information, as well as our own reaction to things. Critical thinking ultimately leads us to reflect on the possible motivations behind every person involved in any given situation.

Critical thinking does not only involve rational thinking but also involves the heart as we participate in honest discussions about our own desires, motives and interests that influence our decisions. The ability to be honest with ourselves and with others about the reasons behind the choices we make is critical to our growth as healthy persons. One of the greatest benefits of critical thinking is that it teaches us to move beyond our self and self-interests as we begin to understand the world and others in a new way. What a radical difference to watch someone grow to learn to incorporate the needs of others into their decision process.

Steps to Discernment

Pierre Wolff, in *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*, suggests that all persons require adequate time, critical thinking, listening to our hearts and using our faith values, to guide us toward good discernment.

1. *We need adequate time.* Wolff suggests that the more difficult the decision, the more time is required as we consider the options. Youth often grow anxious over a situation and feel they must immediately make decisions. Encourage them to take their time to adequately discern all the variables.
2. *We need to use our head* to analyze, distinguish and objectively look at the situation. Many youths are prone to lean heavily on their emotions when making a decision. This is a great time to teach them critical thinking when making a decision, helping them recognize the advantages and disadvantages of a choice as well as the possible consequences.
3. *We need to use our hearts.* Rational is important but we cannot abandon our hearts when making a decision. Almost all of us have made a decision at some point that didn't make sense to others. In other words, when we weighed all the factors by all accounts we should have made a specific decision, but careful reflection also revealed that making that decision would mean a sacrifice in another area of our lives that we were not willing to make. Whatever the case, we balance the rational arguments with what we know about ourselves and our call as Christians.
4. *We use our faith values and Christian vocation as a guide.* Would this decision help me to be faithful to the things that God has called me to be as a person, as a Christian? How will this decision affect those close to me? Does the decision neglect my call to love others as I do myself?

David White suggests that discernment should not only be practiced at an individual level, but that it can serve to challenge faith communities by incorporating discerning practices that impact both youth and adults to learn to understand one another and therefore to learn from one another. In his book, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, White argues for discernment as a four-fold process which consists of:

- *Listening*—Loving God with our hearts by appreciating youth and their stories
- *Understanding*—Loving God with our minds by exploring with young people their context and the issues they face
- *Remembering/Dreaming*—Loving God with our souls by bringing youth into conversation with scripture and history of the church—remembering—and also bring youth into God's vision for how the world should be—dreaming.
- *Acting*—Loving God with our strength by guiding youth to take Christian action in addressing the issues their lives

This process does not need special preparation can occur in congregations as a whole. White also argues that we only harm youth by marginalizing them into groups and fostering distance from the whole faith community. When this happens youth experience firsthand participation in the movement of God among people of God.

The Strong Guide—Guiding with Courage

Walking alongside youth as they grow, mature and develop creates opportunities to recognize and help them move beyond unhealthy behaviors due to a lack of reflection and critical thinking. The task of direction is to guide students to become increasingly self-aware while at the same time increasing their awareness of how their choices impact others.

As mentioned, some youth are better equipped to receive direction, while others struggle to hear or apply the hope and freedom of the message of Christ. And sometimes, a person may be so caught up in their life and world, they are completely unaware of how their behavior is affecting others and it requires firm but loving guidance to direct, discipline or hold them accountable to the values of the faith community. Though Jim Burns reminds us not to become too judgmental about self-preoccupation since youth need understanding and accountability as they grow.

How can we encourage them in their journey? There are a number of key considerations, specific questions and general activities that may assist our guidance. Blending these elements provide a holistic approach that gives us the courage to know we can provide faithful direction in the lives of youth. Determining the right “blend” often requires our understanding of youth context and practicing discernment in developing our own approach to spiritual direction.

Ask youth questions about their choices without judgment as you help them process a situation. The task is to help them see their behavior as inconsistent with who they have expressed they desire to be. Trust that young people have the ability to identify and name their own destructive behaviors when given enough space to process the situation.

Use as many tools as possible (conversations, comments made, commitments voiced, personality tests, etc.) to use as reference points for helping them assess their tendencies and strengths and weaknesses. These tools help youth find and develop a language for what they are processing internally. Youth desire for us to be honest with them about their lives. When young people sense that we truly care and are genuinely listening to them, they will be able to engage in a mutual processing and able to receive direction in the form of honest feedback, warning, caution and even discipline.

Communicate respect for their spiritual journey by carefully listening and knowing when to caution. These conversations involve making them aware of the dangers of certain decisions but freeing them to make the decision(s) on their own. When we give others greater responsibilities they often step up to the challenge and begin to take more seriously the implications of their decisions. When a person chooses a direction that is not the best choice, revisiting their decision-making process and helping them process the outcomes is crucial and is just as important as celebrating their good choices. We often learn more from our mistakes than our successes and as youth workers we need to not fear the lessons that failure or missteps can play in the shaping of our lives for the good. The more we grow in our understanding of growth, the more willing they are to receive instruction in the form of honest assessment of their lives, warning, caution and discipline.

Direction often has a personal element as every person is unique and responds to situations, instruction and challenges in their own way and time. There is no formula for guiding and directing every situation. In *Uncommon Youth Ministry* Burns and DeVries points out three popular misconceptions people have about God.

- *God is demanding and unforgiving*—difficult time accepting the concept of Grace
Recognizing these misconceptions in youth as they process situations will help you know how to help them critically think about their experiences and beliefs. The three misconceptions are:
- *God is Distant and Distracted*—God is too busy running the universe to care about me
- *God is Slow to Forgive*—sense of shame. Remind them continually of timeless truths: Romans 8:1-2 and 1 John 1:9.

The most difficult task of providing guidance is being able to identify and set aside self-interest as you enter the process of analyzing a situation. Self-interest can be quite powerful and misleading. Even as adults it is easy to rationalize our desires and confuse them for God's will. We can mislead ourselves to believe that we are sensing "God's peace" toward a direction when what is really happening is that we are sensing a peace about finally figuring out a way to get what we want. During these times, there may not be anything we can do to convince another person to choose a particular way, however, we must commit to attempt to help the other recognize the consequences of their actions, and to help them see beyond themselves in a situation.

Providing direction involves identifying true conviction from self-imposed guilt or shame. Examining sin as it relates to our longings and its consequences can be something we seldom talk about in the church. We don't always know how to strike the right balance of discipline and grace. But it will be important to teach young adults how to rightly discern when God is using conviction in their lives.

Try to include community approaches that hold youth accountable through regular programming. When persons participate in Communion with a proper understanding of confession and the practice of receiving the grace offered through Christ, this practice can be a rich experience with both personal and corporate reflection.

Challenge the student to practice self-discipline and discernment with caution and accountability. The following are examples of some questions taken from the book, *Spiritual Mentoring*.

- In what ways am I aware of living outside of God's will today?
- Are there words of confrontation that God might wish to speak to me today?
- Are there words of consolation that God might wish to speak to me?
- What is life-giving here and why?
- What is not life-giving here and why not?
- Who is suffering?
- What are some reasons for this present state of affairs?
- Can you explain some of your own attitudes?

Directors may also raise specific questions. The tools of spiritual direction and discernment guide us to hear more fully the voice of the Spirit that guides and directs our steps and calls us to become the persons and communities God is calling us to become.

- How is your prayer life?
- How are you making space in your life for God to speak?
- Where do you sense God in this situation?
- In the midst of all that is confusing to you right now, what do you know to be true? What do you know to be true about the situation? About the person that has wounded you, or that you have wounded?
- Were you faithful to follow the disciplines to which you committed yourself?

True spiritual direction is about trusting that God is at work in the whole life of the other person and that our role in their life remains part of a greater set of influences and voices God is using. There are times when we will need to move out of the way in order for the Holy Spirit to move. We also are freed from believing that we are the only voice in the life of the student. We let go and yet remain present to the movements of growth in their life that even they might be surprised by our awareness. Remember that journeying with youth day in and day out can lead us down avenues with them that we would never have expected, where discipline and accountability must be present. Nevertheless, offering direction will also prove to be a wonderful experience as together we discover again and again the grace and mercy of God in and among us.

Application

Identify some current popular media resources used by youth today (magazines, music, video or internet). Choose 2-3 items and describe the message you believe they are sending youth. What do these messages implicitly say about our responsibility to encourage discernment? How do these messages affect young people's relationships with their parents, school, work, home, church?

Do your own study of how listening can impact youth and adults in your faith community by creating a survey that youth and adults can use to interview one another. Once the study is done, debrief the experience with the youth, and then debrief the experience with the adults that participated. What did the two groups discover about one another?

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Can you give examples of youth in the dualistic stage, in the pluralistic stage, or in the complex commitment stage?

What are the largest issues of society today that challenge youth decision-making?

Who were the people that helped you to learn to practice discernment in your life? What was the most difficult element of discernment when you were learning to think critically as a young person?

What are other factors to consider, or situations where you anticipate you might need to use discipline or accountability in your work with youth?

What are your biggest questions or fears about incorporating discipline and accountability in your work with youth?



Nazarene Youth International

