

The Not-So-Trivial Pursuit of Excellence in Youth & Children's Ministry

"Think about things that are excellent..."
Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

PERSON

Pursuing excellence in both our personal and professional development is essential to our ministry to youth and children.

Personally, each member of a ministry team should be in active pursuit of Christ-likeness in their own lives. This will take a strong commitment to reading, studying and living out the truths of the scriptures, an active prayer life, healthy habits, self evaluation and accountability, to name a few.

Knowing what you bring to the table individually (spiritual gifts, abilities, passions and experiences), committing to building and growing these gifts by using them in ministry, as well as understanding personal strengths and weaknesses are essential to our pursuit of excellence.

Giving our young people a consistently authentic example - a real faith lived out in real life - is critical if we want to really earn their ears and gain a voice of influence in their lives. We should strive to be outstanding in this area.

Professionally, let's take every opportunity we can to learn and grow in our areas of ministry. This will require us to ask questions, listen and understand a culture that is not our own (the 21st century teenager!). It will require thinking outside the box, colouring outside the lines, moving outside of comfort zones, and taking risks. It will be worth every minute of investment.

PARTNERSHIP

Pursuing excellence in our ministries is strengthened by surrounding ourselves with people who can challenge us, help us grow and reach our goals. Together we can rely on each other's strengths and guard each other's weaknesses, maximizing the ministry potential of our team. Understanding what each person brings to the team allows us to select the right team for the right task.

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Proverbs 27:17 (NIV)

Never undervalue the importance of building relationships with parents, networking with other youth and children's workers, fostering intergenerational connections, pairing kids with mentors and an emphasis on building healthy friendships among your young people. Keep youth and children's ministry goals in line with the direction set for the senior corps. Build relationships in your community. These partnerships are invaluable to your ministry.



PURPOSE

Pursuing excellence means never losing sight of the purpose of youth and children's ministry - to lead young people to Christ-likeness. Jesus' mandate to "make disciples" should be central to everything we do. Setting and adhering to a set of principles - irreducible minimums for a healthy youth ministry - will help us to focus on our mission and strive for excellence in this area. Everything we do should be carefully measured against our purpose.

It is important to understand the purpose of our individual ministry, where it fits in the overall picture of our youth and children's ministry objectives and how it contributes to the overarching vision and direction of both the youth and corps ministry.

To hold exceptional standards here, we will need careful evaluation of what we are doing and why it is that we do it, regular revisiting of our principles, and constant recalibration to our purpose.

PREPARATION

Careful preparation is essential to the pursuit of excellence in ministry to youth and children. Pray, then plan. What are the needs we are currently facing? What are the best ways for us to meet these needs? Who are the best people to help us with this particular project?

Be sure to give due diligence to everything from organization and scheduling to examination of content and context; training and screening of volunteers to recording of statistics; promotion to financing; reviewing history to visioning and experimenting with something new. Use the collective creativity of your team to think things through from all the angles.

Somebody has said that we rarely lose our leaders because we expect too much from them, but more because we expect too little. The most invested leaders are usually the ones who have poured their own time, energy and creativity into the preparation and delivery of a lesson, a project, or an event. Resist the urge to recruit leaders with a "very little prep required" strategy, but rather require excellence in preparation.

PRACTICE

Pursuing best practices helps us to strive for excellence.

Carrying out something you've carefully planned, trying out something you've learned, implementing a program, or experimenting with a new idea are all ways we put our ministry into practice - and it requires our best efforts.

"Work at everything you do with all your heart." (Colossians 3:23)

Testing and evaluating keep us moving forward. What worked well? How could it have been "even better if..."?

Don't forget to celebrate together in your youth and children's ministry. Celebrate success - *as well as what you can learn through failure*. Accountability and tracking progress help push us towards ministry goals.

As difficult as it might be, sometimes pursuing what is 'best' may mean letting go of something 'good' - this kind of pruning, casting new vision and replanting is sometimes necessary in order to best equip our youth and children to love, obey and serve as disciples of Jesus Christ.

PERSEVERANCE

To pursue excellence is to persevere - to keep moving forward, to "press on toward the goal". Excellence is not a destination or an arrival, it is a daily commitment to strive to be the person God created you to be and to do your very best in service to him. Guard Sabbath time of rest and encourage the same in your leaders and in those you lead. Provide opportunity for your team to learn, share, celebrate, pray and play together. Set aside time to refocus as a group and prepare for the stretch ahead.

Appreciate and encourage others on your team - a simple thank-you or kind gesture can keep a volunteer going for another week. Provide support - checking in regularly with one another lets others know you are in this together. Provide opportunities for training and growth experiences that better equip your team for ministry. And once they are equipped - empower them and let them lead.

Most importantly, rely on the strength and power that comes from the One you serve. Trust that God will "supply you with everything good. Then you can do what he wants...We can do it only with the help of Jesus Christ." Hebrews 13:20-21 (NIV)

"Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."

Galatians 6:5 (MSG)