

A PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

What is important to you in youth ministry? Or, put another way
– What, in your opinion, is youth ministry primarily all about?

Your answer to this philosophical question will shape your youth ministry practice. In fact, the answer to this question is the most significant indicator of your approach to youth ministry.

Before embarking on this course of study reflect on that question. Resist the temptation to turn the page and read the notes first. Use your answer as a starting point and allow the notes that follow to shape and mould your answer:



In my opinion, youth ministry is primarily about:

The Significance of Philosophy

1. Defining Philosophy

The word “philosophy” is derived from two Greek words:

- a. *Phileo* meaning “love” or “friendship”
- b. *Sophia* meaning “wisdom”

The Cambridge Advanced Learner dictionary gives the following range of definitions of the word “philosophy”:

1. *The use of reason in understanding such things as the nature of reality and existence, the use and limits of knowledge and the principles that govern and influence moral judgment.*
2. *A group of theories and ideas related to the understanding of a particular subject.*
3. *A particular system of beliefs, values and principles.*
4. *Someone's approach to life and their way of dealing with it.*

Some might question the use of the word “philosophy” in a workbook concerned with theology for the two terms have at times been seen as being diametrically opposed in that theology is seen to represent the wisdom of God and philosophy the wisdom of man. Yet we see from the origin of the word and these definitions that philosophy is not necessarily at odds with theology provided the source of the wisdom upon which a philosophy is built is divine.

In establishing a philosophy of youth ministry, this workbook itself begins with two philosophical presuppositions:

- a. That the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God
- b. That it is incumbent on us as Christian leaders to use the God’s Word as our foundation and guide in developing a philosophy of youth ministry through the use of our God given reason and understanding.

Every leader has a preconceived set of ideas about what is important in terms of values and practices in youth ministry
- Richard Dunn¹

During the Middle Ages philosophy and theology had been wed in the system called Scholasticism; but with the decline of Scholasticism and the church the two were divorced, with the result that philosophy became an enemy of theology. Western philosophy was now free to discover answers to the big questions of life by means of human reason alone.
- D M Howard²

2. The Importance of Philosophy

Read the following two stories. Use each as a parable to come up with a statement about the importance of a philosophy:

- (i) *“Maybe you’ve heard the story about the man and his wife riding down a busy freeway. Her complaints and grumbling come out at almost the same fast speed he is driving. After about twenty minutes, twenty five miles, and twenty-nine insults, this gentleman has had it. He loses it all and screams, “Will you stop nagging me? OK! You’re right! We’re lost! But, you gotta admit we’re making great time!””*

- Duffy Robbins³



Having a clearly thought out philosophy of youth ministry is important because:

- (ii) *Eight years after being built, a small crack appeared on the 42nd floor of a multi-story building. The small crack became larger and soon other cracks appeared. The architect was called but when the Managing Director of the company went to meet him there was no sign of him anywhere on the 42nd floor. Before long the call came through that the architect was in the 6th basement. The Managing Director took the lift down to the sixth basement and when he got there he was rather annoyed, and said, “What are you doing in the 6th basement? We have a crack on the 42nd floor.”. The architect replied, “You may have cracks on the 42nd floor, but you don’t have a problem on the 42nd floor. You have a problem in the 6th basement.” It turned out that the builders, in an attempt to cut costs, had use a lower grade of reinforcing in the foundations.*

- Charles Price⁴



Having a clearly thought out philosophy of youth ministry is important because:

The importance of a philosophy of youth ministry is demonstrated by what is **gives** to a youth ministry. What we believe ultimately is reflected in what we do as the following illustrates:

a. Philosophy Gives Foundation

The first thing a philosophy of ministry does is give a youth ministry a foundation on which to build. Most of us begin youth ministry simply surviving from week to week with little thought for the bigger picture. By taking a step back and reflecting on our philosophy we have the opportunity to build a ministry in which is both coherent and Biblical.

b. Philosophy Gives Focus

Secondly, a philosophy of ministry enables the youth leader to identify what is really important within their ministry. It brings into focus that which is primary while at the same time identifying that which is secondary or peripheral. Thus a youth ministry with a clear underlying philosophy ends up “majoring on the majors”, and not the minors.

c. Philosophy Gives Framework

Thirdly, a philosophy of ministry provides a framework around which the youth leader can design a youth ministry structure. The elements in the structure such as the model of ministry used and the leadership structure adopted will reflect the underlying philosophy that has been developed and adopted.

d. Philosophy Gives Function

Fourthly, a philosophy of ministry leads the youth leader to identify what it is they need to be doing and how they are to go about doing it. It will crystallise for them the elements of their job description so that what they spend their time doing contributes to the overall foundation and focus of the youth ministry.

e. Philosophy Gives Format

Finally, a philosophy of ministry leads to a format for programming. Various programming types and the procedures followed within these programmes will be reflective of the predominant aspects of the youth ministry philosophy.

One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.

- Eleanor Roosevelt

In an effort to get the work of the Lord done we often lose contact with the Lord of the work and quite literally wear our people out as well. I have heard more than one pastor boast that his church was a "live" one, pointing to the printed calendar as a proof - something on every night and several meetings during the day. Of course this proves nothing except that the pastor and the church are being guided by a bad spiritual philosophy. A great many of these time-consuming activities are useless and others plain ridiculous.

- A. W. Tozer⁵



Refer back to your statement on the first page in which you said "Youth ministry is primarily about...". Assess the importance of this statement in the ministry which you have fashioned around you.

FOUNDATION

NO

YES

"My statement essentially sums the whole approach to the ministry which is under my leadership."

FOCUS

NO

YES

"My statement corresponds to the greatest emphases evident in the way the ministry operates."

FRAMEWORK

NO

YES

"The model of ministry used and the leadership structure adopted are reflection of my statement."

FUNCTION

NO

YES

"My statement is reflective of the way in which I invest my time in ministry."

FORMAT

NO

YES

"The programmes which I have responsibility for running are a reflection of my statement."

ASSESSMENT:

To what extent is your original statement reflected in the above? Were there any areas of ministry identified in the above process that you think need further examination and alteration:

3. The Impact of Philosophy

An underlying philosophy can have a significant impact on the life and witness of an individual, ministry or church. Consider the following verses, all of which demonstrate the impact our underlying beliefs have upon our life:

No one should pay attention to a man delivering a lecture or a sermon on his "philosophy of life" until he knows exactly how he treats his wife, his children, his neighbors, his friends, his subordinates, and his enemies.
- Sydney Harris⁶

a. The power of philosophy to deceive

⁸ *Don't let anyone lead you astray with empty philosophy and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the evil powers of this world, and not from Christ.*
- Colossians 2:8

b. The power of philosophy to affect behaviour

⁴³ *"A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ⁴⁴ A tree is identified by the kind of fruit it produces. Figs never grow on thornbushes or grapes on bramble bushes. ⁴⁵ A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say.*
- Luke 6:43-45

c. The power of philosophy of lead to sin

²¹ *Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. ²³ And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes. ²⁴ So God let them go ahead and do whatever shameful things their hearts desired.*
- Romans 1:21-24a

d. The power of philosophy to bring about change

² *Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.*
- Romans 12:2

The Components of a Philosophy

1. The Elements of a Philosophy

A youth ministry philosophy is made up of a number of components⁷, each of which will be examined in greater depth in subsequent sections. These components act like lenses or frames through which a philosophy is established. These are, from most fundamental to least:

a. A Theological Framework

This framework consists of the youth leader's understanding of what the full counsel of scripture teaches about such things as the nature of God, man and salvation.

b. An Ecclesiological Framework

This framework consists of the youth leader's understanding of the nature and operation of leadership, the church, and the place of youth ministry within the life of the church.

c. A Developmental Framework

This framework consists of the youth leader's understanding of the process of adolescent development and its implications for the manner in which ministry to young people is undertaken.

d. A Cultural Framework

This framework consists of the youth leader's observations and conclusions about global culture and what is required in order to reach and disciple those within the culture.

e. An Historical Framework

This framework consists of the youth leader's understanding of the historical changes as they relate to adolescent development and culture, and their implication for future trends.

f. A Sociological Framework

This framework consists of sociological characteristics of local culture, with particular reference to the factors that influence adolescents in the local community.

He is still one of the most widely read Christian authors, and his *Confessions* can be found in any bookstore. Augustine was a restless intellectual in his younger days, trying to find a philosophy that would bring him happiness. He struggled with sexual morality and had a son by his mistress. But in 386 he experienced a conversion to Christianity, which began with a solitary reading of Romans 13:13-14: "*Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust ... But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*" As Augustine tells the story in his *Confessions*, he was sitting in a garden and heard a child's voice saying, "Take it and read it, take it and read it," and he saw the scroll of Romans lying nearby. The incident was the turning point in his life, and he became one of Christianity's most notable theologians.⁸

Leaders must develop a ministry philosophy that simultaneously honours biblical leadership values, embraces the challenges of the times in which we live, and fits their unique gifts and personal development if they expect to be productive over a lifetime.

- Robert Clinton⁹



Answer the questions below in order to construct a draft statement of youth ministry philosophy. Don't be concerned with trying to complete a finished document. This will be what you will be working on in subsequent sections. For now the aim is for you to simply produce a draft to help you become familiar with the six components.

THEOLOGICAL

What words would you use to describe God?

What is man's greatest need?

ECCLESIOLOGICAL

What is the purpose of the church?

What is the primary role of a Christian leader?

DEVELOPMENTAL

Which are teenagers more like: "an older child" or "a young adult"?

What spiritual expectations are realistic for a youth leader to have for a young person?

CULTURAL

What are the most common creeds of today's culture?

How do these creeds affect young peoples' approach to life?

HISTORICAL

What changes have taken place in youth development and culture since you were a teenager?

What are some of the trends you see in society that will affect the way we do youth ministry?

SOCIOLOGICAL

What is the role of parents in relation to the spiritual growth of their teenager?

What words would you use to describe teenager's relationship with their peers?:

2. The Characteristics of a Philosophy

A good youth ministry philosophy must be:

a. Biblical

Its essential tenets must be able to be defended from Scripture. It does not consist of the leader's own ideas and pet theories but is firmly grounded in broad yet specific principals found in the Word of God.

b. Balanced

A good youth ministry philosophy should reflect due regard to each of the five components on the previous page and yet no be focused on just one or two to the exclusion of others. It should be built primarily on the theological framework with the other four components built on it in decreasing importance.

c. Basic

A youth ministry philosophy should contain only basic or fundamental principles. It does not get down into detail of how the ministry is structured or how programmes are run.

d. Based in Reality

A youth ministry philosophy does not exist in a vacuum - it reflects something of the church community in which it is established. Factors such as the ethos of the wider church, leadership, and the young people themselves, will have some affect on philosophy. So too will the season of ministry and the calling God has for a group at a particular time.

Most often youth workers—and especially youth pastors are very pragmatic and oriented to the program: fun and games, Bible studies, camps, retreats, social activities, and such things. It is a little difficult to talk about philosophy and theology with such youth workers in the morning when they know they are taking care of fifteen junior highers that same evening. Further, youth workers have a reputation not being "thinkers" but doers, being more interested in how to do youth ministry than in the reasons and basis of it.

- John Detoni¹⁰

The Origins of Our Philosophy

We all have a youth ministry philosophy based on numerous presuppositions. Some presuppositions are almost self evident; others are formed through careful thought and reflection; while still others are all but subliminal. These latter ones are so much a part of our belief system that we are barely conscious of them, yet their effect can be just as powerful – if not more so.

These presuppositions are developed in us in a variety of ways and are listed here from self evident to subliminal – from most authoritative to least:

a. Revelation

While scripture does not give a detailed prescription of how to run a ministry, there are many clear statements regarding the person of God, the nature of man, and salvation that are fundamental to any philosophy of ministry. These will be studied in greater depth in the following section.

b. Reason

While scripture gives us explicit statements that form our philosophy of ministry, there are areas less explicit where we must use our God-given powers reason to establish theology and integrate these beliefs into our philosophy. These might be:

- (i) Grey areas where the Bible is silent or at best non-explicit and specific conclusions are drawn from broad principles (e.g. conversion and adolescence)
- (ii) Areas where we endeavour to bring balance to two different aspects of the same truth (e.g. the love of God vs. the justice of God).
- (iii) Areas where we must determine what is cultural and what is incumbent upon us for all time (e.g. procedures for meeting together).

These also will be studied in greater depth in subsequent sections.

We've lost sight of the fact that some things are always right and some things are always wrong. We've lost our reference point. We don't have any moral philosophy to undergird our way of life in this country, and our way of life is in serious jeopardy and serious danger unless something happens. And that something must be a spiritual revival.

- Billy Graham¹¹

c. Research

Teachings of others we research and study, through the hearing sermons and the reading of books. These are then integrated with other aspects of our own philosophy of youth ministry.

d. Pragmatism

A pragmatic approach to the development of a philosophy is based on the tenet of, “If it works it must be right!” Here a philosophy is made that is seen to justify what God is apparently blessing in ministry. Some examples might be:

- *We are seeing young people come to Christ through evangelism in the high schools, so we will make that a part of our youth ministry philosophy*
- *Our leadership is predominantly made up of parents so we will make a family based approach to ministry part of our philosophy*
- *We lack leadership so we will have a philosophy of ministry that sees young people taking responsibility for leadership*

Note that a philosophy developed from pragmatism is not necessarily wrong – it can be indicative of a philosophical emphasis God wants to bring to a youth ministry at a given time. Care must be taken though to ensure that it is aligned with the principles and precepts of Scripture.

e. Personal Observation

Similar to pragmatism but more subjective still is personal observation. We see another youth ministry that is effective and we borrow their philosophy and integrate it with our own.

f. Personal Experience

Finally personal experience plays a part on the development of a philosophy of ministry. Those of us brought up in a youth ministry that had a positive impact on our spiritual development may deliberately or subconsciously adopt the philosophical precepts upon which it was built.

*⁷ For you know that you ought to follow our example. We were never lazy when we were with you. ⁸ We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so that we would not be a burden to any of you.
- 2 Thessalonians 3:7,8*

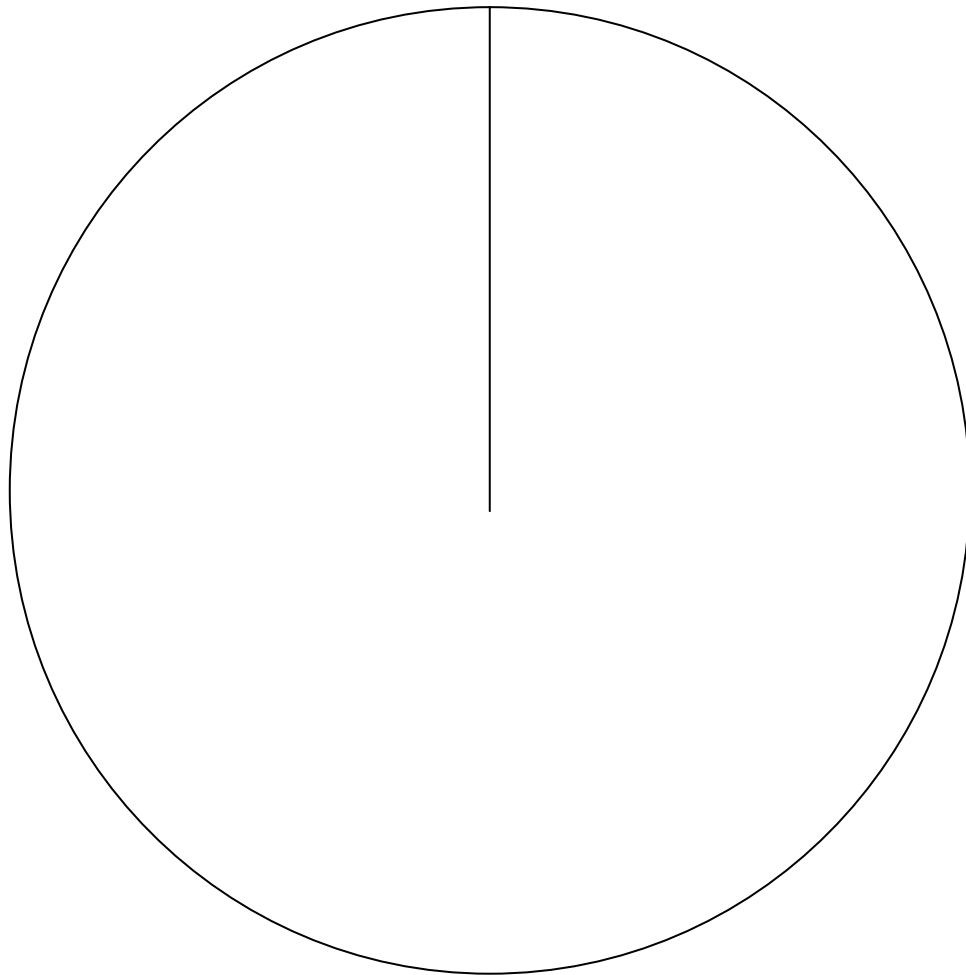


Reflect on the extent to which various factors have shaped your philosophy of ministry. Use the circle below to construct a pie chart on which you proportionately graph the factors listed, drawing lines from the labels to the graph and giving examples of aspects of your philosophy from each.

REVELATION

REASON

RESEARCH



PRAGMATISM

PERSONAL
OBSERVATION

PERSONAL

EXPERIENCE

Complete the following sentence:

"In order to have a more effective philosophy of youth ministry I need to..."

For Further Thought...

Identify the main areas of similarity and difference between your statement and the start of the session and your actual practice. Reflect on the extent to which your practice is shaped by your statement.

