

**BANG  
HEAD  
HERE**



# **7 EPIC YOUTH MINISTRY MISTAKES**

**How Many Is Your  
Church Making?**

*Mark DeVries*

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# INTRODUCTION

“ If you carry the same old bricks from your past into today, you’ll wind up building the same kind of house that fell apart the first time. ”

**A**fter lots of years of working with lots of youth ministries, we’ve seen churches, again and again, get tripped up in the very same places.

Like watching a hydroplaning car fishtail and careen out of control, we’ve watched helplessly from the sidelines as ministries hit the same slick spots and slide toward their inevitable crash. And we’ve had the mournful privilege of working with churches still dealing with this kind of wreckage even decades later.

The tragedy is that youth ministries and youth ministers



are hitting the very same hazards and potholes that have plagued so many others before them. But an even greater tragedy is that so many churches and so many youth leaders are choosing to make these mistakes for themselves, seldom learning from the repeated crashes of others before them. Most of the time, the carnage is totally avoidable.

Yet the same churches make the same mistakes with each successive youth pastor. And the same youth pastors repeat their same mistakes at each successive church (with shocking regularity).

## **IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.**

The old proverb is right:

The wise learn from their own mistakes.

**The wiser learn from the mistakes of others.**



The wise learn from their own mistakes. The wiser learn from the mistakes of others.



## MISTAKE #1:

# The Youth Pastor's Vision

“The church that allows (or even encourages) its youth pastors to “bring their own vision” has already lost.”

Pastors and youth pastors, at their best, steward and crystalize their church's vision. At their worst, they try to sell the church on their own peculiar vision, a vision that will almost always evaporate when that youth pastor leaves, giving the church a snowflake's chance of sustaining a thriving youth ministry beyond the tenure of an individual leader.

“Pastors and youth pastors, at their best, steward and crystalize their church's vision.”

And churches that make this mistake often get another unfortunate consequence as a result:

In these churches we often hear youth pastors saying things like “My vision and the pastor’s vision don’t exactly line up.” And when the youth pastor is popular enough, some churches will put up with all kinds of divisiveness and destructive negativity from him or her regardless of the impact.

### **LET ME SAY IT PLAINLY.**

Too many youth directors can’t stand the churches where they work, and too many stay in those churches far too long. They develop a way of isolating themselves from the rest of the staff and the rest of the church, avoiding collaboration as much as possible.

Many “successful” youth leaders come with giftedness that far surpasses their character and maturity.

And apart from strong mentoring structures for young leaders, many come to assume that their talent, their orthodoxy, their \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) anoints them with the God-given authority to undermine their senior pastors (and often their churches’ long-term witness). Danger Will Robinson! This is not a good place to be.

If you as a youth pastor are not on board with the church’s vision, go somewhere where you can be. Faithfulness (and even

moderate intelligence) requires that you stop shooting holes in the other side of the boat if you intend to stay afloat.

“ Faithfulness requires that you stop shooting holes in the other side of the boat if you intend to stay afloat. ”

If you are not crazy about the church’s vision, either figure out how to support it, or figure out how to leave. And oh yeah, until you leave, support the church’s vision; anything less is way too costly, both for you and for the church.

An organization’s vision is almost never up for a vote. Robust debate? Sure. Collaborative dreaming? Absolutely. But divisive, hushed-toned, us-against-them conversations led by the youth pastor in the church parking lot? Not on your life.

Jesus did say a little something about a house divided.

## MISTAKE #2:

# The Hunt for Older Youth

“I’m sad to tell you that I’ve had a disappointingly high number of graduates return from college and say, “I just can’t seem to find a church as good as our youth group.” This, by the way, is not a compliment.”

**A**sk a group of youth pastors how many of them struggle with upperclassmen dropping out of their ministries, and you’ll see heads nodding in unison.

Most churches resign themselves to the belief that, after the driver’s license, a wholesale dropout rate is just inevitable.

This sense of resignation typically occurs only after churches have tried a parade of special programs to attract and re-engage the older youth. Some plan special events just for this age group. Others redouble their efforts at getting the word out on Facebook and Twitter. And still others pull together focus groups of disengaged youth, hoping to snag them before they’ve made it all the way out the door.

**BUT TRYING TO GET OLDER YOUTH BACK INTO OUR PROGRAMS IS A MISTAKE.**



## LET ME EXPLAIN.

I'm sad to tell you that I've had a disappointingly high number of graduates return from college and say, "I just can't seem to find a church as good as our youth group." This, by the way, is not a compliment.

The truth is that we actually want our older youth to leave. We want them to leave with a rich love for Christ and an eagerness to serve. In most cases kids will leave us (at least for a time), so we want them to leave prepared to plug into a new community of faith, one that is not their youth group.

"Successfully" selling them on coming to more programs designed specifically for them may just backfire in the long run. Depending on our marketing prowess with older youth may inadvertently increase in their passivity about spiritual things or help them hone their refusal skills, sealing self-identities as those who don't go to church.

## HOW ABOUT WE TRY THIS ALTERNATIVE:

Instead of trying to get kids to come back for one more year of fading enthusiasm about the same kinds of programs that they've done for the past 5 or 6 years, how about we spend our

energy giving each of them a mission. A few might serve in the youth ministry. But more likely, they would serve in other ministries of

the church—helping out with the children’s ministry, assisting in worship, singing in the adult worship team, serving on the planning and promotion team for a local mission like Habitat.

My standard rule with older youth is this: “If they aren’t leading, they are leaving.”



Instead of trying to get kids to come back for one more year... How about we spend our energy giving each of them a mission?



So we can step off of the treadmill of trying to get our older youth to “return” to our programs for them and focus instead on launching them into the messy work of God’s work through them.

## MISTAKE #3:

# The Glitter Clutter Trap

“Someone much busier than you are  
is working out here right now.”  
– Sign on gym window

**M**ost youth pastors I know and most youth ministries we’ve observed find it almost impossible to tell the difference between gold and glitter, between a real problem and a scary shadow of one. Everyday, a chorus line of shiny objects vie for first place in a youth ministry or on a youth pastor’s schedule. The gold—the game changer priorities—are almost always deeply buried and almost never show themselves without a little digging.

### THAT’S WHERE THE PROBLEM COMES.

When you’re facing an avalanche of secondary priorities—like catastrophizing over the latest “crisis” du jour—it’s hard to take the “luxury” of 15 to 20 minutes a day to identify what really matters. However, ministries that make an impact are almost always led by people who know trivia when they meet it and

refuse to be entangled by it. They understand that glitter sticks to everything and always seems to be around.

The mistake is assuming that finding the gold amidst the glitter should go something like this:

Developing my volunteer team—that's essential. Check.

Responding to email. That's secondary. Got it.

## **BUT NOT SO FAST.**

What passes for “developing my volunteer team” for some youth pastors is really a third 2-hour lunch of the month with the same volunteer to just shoot the breeze — definitely not an essential priority. And sometimes taking 12 minutes to respond thoughtfully and proactively to the right three emails can save you countless hours down the road.

To complicate matters even more, today's trivia just might be next month's absolutely essential priority. The mistake is failing to take the time to discern the difference. The mistake is thinking that your busyness somehow exempts you from the process.

Too many youth ministries are led by those who end most ministry days bemoaning, “I have no idea what I did today...I just ran from one interruption to another.” Of course, there will

be days like this for all of us, but for a shocking number of youth pastors, this pattern is much too normal.

If you're one of those leaders, finding yourself in the frustrating what-did-I-really-accomplish-today pattern, you will never move the needle without making time to work on your life and ministry, not just in it. You won't have time for the essential priorities—like building systems—until you have a process for regularly identifying what matters most and putting everything else in your “intentional procrastination” pile. Once the essentials are taken care of, you look at that pile. Get the gold and then sweep up the glitter.

“

You will never move the needle without making time to work *on* your life and ministry, not just *in* it.

”

## MISTAKE #4:

# Rock Star Addiction

**“As long as they can find at least one superstar every 25 or 30 years, these churches will cling to this approach forever—even when it delivers favorable results less than only 2 or 3 years out of 25.”**

**A**lmost every struggling youth ministry in the country has somewhere in its collective memory at least one mythological youth leader from the glory days. This leader—whether volunteer or staff—filled rooms with kids effortlessly, taught the real gospel without compromise, and did legendary antics like showing up on every kids’ front porch with a trombone blaring “Happy Birthday” at 6 AM (without missing a single kid’s special day).

As the memories of a rock star youth leader fade, the grander his or her kingdom exploits become and the more the church becomes addicted to the crack of finding someone just like him or her. Of course, these churches often forget details like their previous rock star youth leader staying for a surprisingly short tenure or dropping out of ministry altogether or that unexpected hospitalization.

The search for the illusive rock star leader can be so hard to shake that, despite all evidence that this is a bad idea, churches persist in the notion that THE answer to their youth ministry malaise is the rock star.



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These churches can run through a series of everyday, garden-variety youth leaders for decades (I'm not kidding) and never consider the possibility that they've been searching for the wrong kind of leader all along.

As long as they can find at least one superstar every 25 or 30 years, these churches will cling to this approach forever—even when it delivers favorable results less than only 2 or 3 years out of 25.

Like a gambler who would rather bet the farm on the lottery than make sound (and boring) investment choices, youth ministries in these churches tend to live on the verge of ministry bankruptcy almost all the time. Like any healthy organization, wise churches don't put their ministry in the risky position of setting themselves up with a single point of failure. Wise churches do not depend on a single person whose departure or demise could bring the entire ministry down like a house of cards.

Churches that avoid this mistake build sustainable ministries. They build a solid infrastructure that doesn't fall apart when the superstar is gone. These churches know that they can build long-term healthy ministries by building a team of leaders, moderately gifted folks who know how to play their various positions well:

The architect who designs the ministry plan, the general contractor who manages and sequences the flow of work for implementing the plan, and the laborers who carry specific ministry responsibilities, like teaching, event planning, and website management.



Churches that avoid this mistake  
build sustainable ministries.





## MISTAKE #5:

# Exhausted by Normal

**“If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?”**

**Jeremiah 12:5**

**W**hen we ask church leaders to identify why their struggling youth ministries aren't working, we hear the same predictable answers: Our youth ministry right now is facing a special set of challenges...

“Our families just don't make church a priority.”

“Our kids are in rival schools, and we have cliques.”

“Our parents just drop their kids off and don't care.”

“Our people don't...(circle all that apply)

- Volunteer
- RSVP for Events
- Answer Their Phones
- Respond to Emails”

“Our parents think sports are more important than church.”

“Our worship services are just not engaging.”

(and by far the most popular) “Our kids are INCREDIBLY busy!”

## **MAYBE YOU SEE THE MISTAKE ALREADY.**

Without question, these factors do make youth ministry more difficult. But these are the exact same issues that almost every thriving youth ministry in the country faces. In other words, they are challenges that are being overcome every day of the week in other churches.



This mistake feels a little bit like a football coach explaining that “the team isn’t winning because . . .”

- “We’re playing against really big players.”
- “Linebackers keep tackling our guys.”
- “The weather has been against us every Sunday.”
- “Our fans just aren’t supportive.”

Believe me. I understand this work is hard. You’ll get no argument from me there. I’m just asking that youth workers and churches a) stop acting like their current, fabulously common



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challenges are a sure sign of the end of the world and b) spend their hand-wringing energy making things better.

## MISTAKE #6:

# Cheap and Quick

“ Good saddles ain’t cheap,  
and cheap saddles ain’t good. ”  
– Cowboy proverb

**R**unning an ordinary, healthy youth ministry can be a surprisingly expensive enterprise. Sadly, most churches try to build a youth ministry “on the cheap” and then wonder why it never works.

Few things are more common in a church than unrealistic expectations about what should be happening in a youth ministry. Typically, those who remember the glory days (usually it really was DAYS, and not much longer), take the snapshot of the youth ministry’s absolute peak, amplify by at least 2, and make that the standard for the youth ministry to live up to forever.

To make matters worse, most churches want an immediate return to the glory days but at a bargain price. As a result, those churches engage in a litany of desperation strategies designed to

turn things around in a tiny time frame at infinitesimal expense (free is, of course, preferred).

But solid, sustainable, long-term youth ministries don't build their game plan around throwing one hail Mary after another. Great youth ministries don't invest in the ecclesial equivalent of lottery tickets. Great youth ministries don't focus on a simplistic solution that begins with words like

- "If only..."
- "If we could just..."
- "When we finally..."

Thriving youth ministries match their expectation to their investment. If they've got a small budget, they rejoice in a smaller, solid youth ministry, rather than wallowing in discouragement about their size.



Thriving youth ministries  
match their expectation to  
their investment.



Once a church knows what a ministry costs they plan deliberately—for statistics about what churches should reasonably expect to pay for a successful youth ministry, see [Sustainable Youth Ministry](#). So youth ministry is not just expensive in dollars, it is also expensive in terms of the investment of time and deliberate, sustained effort.

Building a healthy ministry always takes time. When we tell churches to count on 18 months to see a fully built ministry, we see people’s anxiety levels go through the roof. And when a



Building a healthy ministry  
always takes time.



church is addicted to cheap approaches and quick fixes, they will “choose” to flounder for decades and will often spend far more time and money than it would have taken to build their ministry right in the first place. *Sustainable youth ministry* is expensive, but not nearly as expensive as not having one.

## MISTAKE #7:

# Leading on Empty

“I’m pretty sure it’s not a badge of honor to stop growing, stop learning, and stop being coached. But too many youth ministries are led by leaders making this mistake.”

**H**e said it with the pride of someone who had just completed a marathon, “I haven’t read a book in 10 years, and I’ve never had to see a counselor.”

I’m pretty sure it’s not a badge of honor to stop growing, stop learning, and stop being coached. But too many youth ministries are led by leaders making this mistake.

They stopped growing and learning just about the time they moved into their first “adult” ministry job. And they often make the even bigger mistake of being proud of it! Like a boxer bragging about skipping workouts, the results of an empty tank is certain to show up when the heat is on.

Sure, they are happy to go to an inspirational “training” conference every now and then. But most block themselves off from the transforming impact of reading books and receiving coaching.



Like a boxer bragging about skipping workouts, the results of an empty tank is certain to show up when the heat is on.



When I ask a group of youth pastors to tell me about the people who are coaching them, in any area of their lives—ministry, marriage, parenting, faith, exercise, emotions, leadership, finance, friendship, business—I get confused stares. “Who” they wonder, “has time for the luxury of getting coaching when there are so many urgent tasks that absolutely must be done?”

### **ASK AN OLYMPIAN.**

Every Olympian has a coach. Every Olympian is deliberately working to improve at their craft. The only people who need to worry about making time for the “luxury” of coaching and reading are the people who care about what they do enough to get better at it all the time.



When my kids were growing up, one of my first priorities was for them to be mentored and coached by people growing in Christ themselves. What I wasn't looking for as a parent were leaders in my kids lives who had stopped learning and spent their "study" time preparing messages that consisted of rearranging and reinforcing the same opinions, teaching points, and prejudices they had had for years.

If we are going to effectively engage the next generation with the gospel of Christ, we've got to do more than try harder at doing the things that don't really work, what Seth Godin calls, "polishing junk."

“

I'm pretty sure it's not a badge of honor to stop growing, stop learning, and stop being coached. But too many youth ministries are led by leaders making this mistake.

”

# The Biggest Mistake of All

“What if the biggest mistake is trying to avoid mistakes altogether?”

One of my coaches reminded me recently that the secret to any successful enterprise is to make mistakes ... quickly.

In any enterprise as dynamic and ever-changing as youth ministry, mistakes are just a part of the job description. But you don't need to make the same mistakes everyone else is making. Avoid the 7 most common mistakes, and you'll leap frog (to making mistakes at a whole new level!).

You actually want to make mistakes moving in the right direction—doing the work that has the greatest potential to move you forward. What if the biggest mistake you can make is trying to avoid mistakes altogether? Too many, in their commitment to avoid mistakes, simply do nothing.

If you do something—especially something you've never done before—you're going to make mistakes. But be encouraged, the

most direct route to the kind of ministry your church dreams of goes directly through a series of mistakes that start with taking the risk to do something that you haven't already done.

If you'd like a little support and direction helping your church's youth ministry "fail forward," we've got a resource that just might help.

I want to offer you access to our online youth ministry diagnostic—a \$40 value—for just \$10. It doesn't take that long to complete, but it will help you pinpoint the areas in your ministry that require the most attention right now, help you identify where you need to dig for gold, and give you a beginning road map for tending to the priorities that can move the needle for your ministry.

And to let you know we are committed to helping you create a healthy, sustainable youth ministry, we'll make available an optional, free 30-minute phone coaching session with me or one of our consultants for everyone who completes the online diagnostic. **Just enter promo code "7mistakes" when you check out.**

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AND 30 MINUTES OF FREE COACHING**

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———— **THANK YOU!** ————

Thank you for reading 7 Epic Youth Ministry Mistakes. We hope this book will help you avoid all of these pitfalls.

If you have any questions, feel free to visit us on our website at [MinistryArchitects.com](http://MinistryArchitects.com), or you can reply to the email we sent you. We'll do our best to get back to you ASAP!