What’s the point of youth ministry?

Some will say it’s to “get them in the door.”  Others will say it’s to “give them positive experiences.”  I even heard one elder in a job interview tell me the job was to “sit them down and shut them up long enough to teach them the catechism.”

I tend to lean more into the camp that says that youth ministry should be designed to set students up for a lifetime of engagement in the mission of Jesus Christ through the church. I truly believe that we are not succeeding unless our children’s ministries, Middle School ministries, and High School ministries are shuttling young people into the life of the church.  Not just your church or my church but the church.

There has been a lot of talk about this subject in ministry circles as we’ve seen recent research come to life through the Sticky Faith initiative that tells us that as much as 50% of our students are walking away from faith and the church before they are out of college.

That might change if we had a new goal about “bridge crossing” in our youth ministries; if we viewed our role as engaging students in the life and leadership of the church so when they reach that 18-30-year-old demographic, the narrative of the church starts to change.

One way to do that is to think intentionally about engaging young adults and college students now.  It’s desperately important for us to sharpen our skills in working with 18-30-year-olds if we want our youth ministries to succeed past graduation.

### **And there’s good news!**

Having a thriving ministry to college students and young adults is possible!  In fact, 18-30-year-olds today – the Millennial Generation – are more primed than ever to make an impact for the kingdom through the church.

**Here are 6 key strategies that successful churches seem to use when they approach ministry with millennials:**

Strategy #1: Leadership Development

Find half a dozen key leaders in college or in their 20s and begin a journey of discipling them and equipping them to reach others just like them.  You might find this strategy actually reaching MORE young adults than an attractional program might!

Strategy #2:  Relationships

Everything we do with millennials should find a way to foster the value of relationships, whether it’s the way we structure a program, a discipleship strategy or even a worship service.  How is your ministry intentionally fostering and developing relationships?

Strategy #3: Authenticity

Most young people have a built-in meter that goes off when they are near religious people that feel fake.  What they are looking for isn’t so much a worship style or preaching style or even the right set of core values.  What they are looking for is how our churches are holding these values.  Does the walk match the talk?  Is this a place I can bring my whole self to and find acceptance?  Or do I have to fake it around these people?  What are the ways your ministry is fostering authenticity?

Strategy #4: Depth

Believe it or not, young people don’t want to swim in the shallow end of the faith pool.  They are looking for a faith that really matters to the core of the people who claim it.  Rather than your next “young adult scavenger hunt & pizza party” think more intentionally about spiritual depth you can provide millennials.  Are you saving the “heavy stuff” for “grown-ups?” or are you helping young people grapple with the deep end of faith?

Strategy #5: A Call to Action

Young adults and college students want to see a faith that looks active.  Whether it’s an initiative to bring clean water to third-world countries, fighting for human rights or putting an end to human trafficking, if your ministry isn’t calling millennials to action, you’re going to be missing out on millennials.

Strategy #6:  Meaningful Contributions

How can you find a way to help young people contribute meaningfully to the life and leadership of the church?  They want to change the world, they believe they can do it, we’ll be missing out if we simply ask them to usher once a month.  Finding a way for them to be creators and leaders in our ministry will not only engage them but also provide a link from older generations into the next stage of life of your ministry.

There are many different approaches we can employ in order to go after these strategies but if we can find a way to build in these foundations into our work with young adults, we might just find our youth ministries with a higher retention rate as students cross into the world of adulthood within our churches, not just outside them.