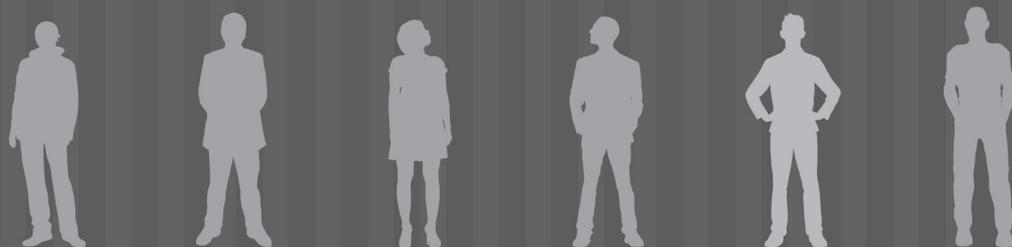


BEFORE YOU HIRE A YOUTH PASTOR



A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

MARK DEVRIES & JEFF DUNN-RANKIN

BEFORE YOU READ: RECOGNIZING WHAT'S AT STAKE

INTRODUCTION

“GOOD MATCHES BETWEEN CONGREGATION AND PASTOR. THIS IS FAR MORE DEMANDING TODAY THAN IT WAS FIFTY YEARS AGO! THE DIFFERENCES AMONG GENERATIONS, AMONG INSTITUTIONS IN GENERAL . . . AND AMONG MEMBERS OF ANY ONE GENERATION . . . ARE FAR GREATER TODAY THAN THEY WERE IN THE 1950s. THE DEMAND TODAY IS FOR A CUSTOMIZED MATCH.”

—LYLE SCHALLER, *A MAINLINE TURNAROUND*¹

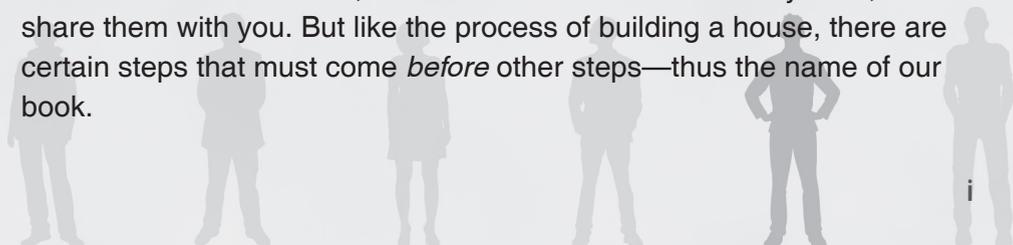
You're searching again.

And if you're like most churches, it doesn't seem that long since you hired your last youth worker. And whether you are thrilled to have the chance to start over or grieving the loss of your most recent youth pastor or somewhere in between, we hope this little book can provide the introduction to the next chapter of your youth ministry. We hope to give you the tools you need to find the right staff person for your youth ministry as quickly as possible (but no quicker).

To get us started on the right path, we need to be clear about how this highly effective search process works:

- It isn't fast
- It isn't easy
- But it works

There are a few shortcuts, and rest assured that where they exist, we'll share them with you. But like the process of building a house, there are certain steps that must come *before* other steps—thus the name of our book.



We want to be very up-front here: A thorough search process results in hiring better-fit candidates. Better-fit candidates are likely to stay longer. And youth pastors who stay longer have a much greater chance of building a ministry that is sustainable beyond their tenure.

Ironically, churches that work the steps outlined in this book will need this book much less frequently.

But the opposite is true as well. Churches that rush the search process and hire quickly are less likely to hire well. Churches that don't hire well are more likely to see short-term, unhappy youth workers. A series of short-term, unhappy youth workers undeniably will have negative effects on the long-term stability of your youth ministry.

And so, we hope this little resource accelerates your search process by slowing it down, something that Fellowship Church just couldn't do.

THE FELLOWSHIP STORY

Fellowship Church was laser focused on hiring its next youth worker. When suggestions were made that the church first might want to do a little strategic thinking about the vision of the youth ministry, church leaders insisted that visioning would be the job of the new youth director.

The search had been going for nine months, built on the blind assumption that the person the church was looking for was just around the corner. In the meantime, the youth ministry was put on hold, the fabric of the youth ministry unraveled, volunteers scattered, and competing visions multiplied.

Finally, the long-anticipated day arrived. The new youth pastor took the reins amid great excitement and celebration. Within weeks of his launch, most of the volunteer team was happy to hand the responsibility over to him. They were exhausted, leaving him, as he described it, “a full year behind.” That was the bad news.

The worse news was that the volunteers who did continue serving were motivated by an anxious desire to protect the competing corners of the ministry they had each shepherded for the past year—instead of eagerly embracing a new vision.



But after a year and a half of hard work, when the new youth worker was just beginning to get traction with his volunteer team and students, he got a call.

The camp he had grown up attending as a teenager, where he had served every summer during college, called to offer him the director's position. Although he loved his church, the new leaders he had recruited, the families, and especially the teenagers, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity he simply couldn't pass up.

He left in the next month, and today the church is searching again, no further along than it was two years ago, destined to repeat the same cycle again, assuming that the smartest bet is to put all its eggs in the basket marked, "Just Hire the Right Youth Director...Fast."

This revolving-door approach to staffing a youth ministry has never worked very well. Here's why: When the youth ministry is built solely around the person in the role of youth pastor, you can count on a major disruption to your youth ministry every three years.

There is another way. And that's why we've written this book.

We are absolutely committed to seeing churches build sustainable youth ministries (see *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, InterVarsity Press, 2008) that last beyond the tenure of any given staff person. And to achieve this priority, we are convinced that *churches* (not youth pastors) must own their student ministries and hire youth pastors who can steward those ministries for a season. In the pages that follow, we'll provide you with a step-by-step process to begin making this shift.

WHO NEEDS THIS BOOK?

Maybe you're reading this book because you are a pastor who knows how crucial a successful youth pastor search will be for your entire church's future. Maybe you are reading this book because you have been hand-selected by your pastor to be the point person for your church's youth pastor search. Or maybe you're reading this book because you have just begun serving on a team of people charged with finding your church's next professional youth worker.

The biggest challenge you will face in your search process will not be finding the right people, or conducting the right interviews, or offering the right package. More than likely, the biggest challenge you will face is the chronic inexperience of the folks on your team. In our informal observations, most Search Teams are made up of people who have participated on an average of just over zero youth ministry searches. And as with the first time doing anything, the learning curve can be mighty steep. And so...

This is a book for **SEARCH TEAMS**: There are simply too many details related to an effective search for any single volunteer to reasonably manage all of them. For this reason, we have written this book primarily addressed to *teams* of volunteers charged with carrying out the details of the search process.

This is a book for **OTHERS IN THE CHURCH WHO NEED AN EXPECTATION ADJUSTMENT**: There may be a significant number of volunteers who do not serve on the formal Search Team but who will want to (and need to) have some investment in the search process. For example, the Search Team may solicit the help of a number of volunteers who will assist with making dozens of sourcing phone calls. It may be helpful for them to read this book, or parts of it, to understand the work they have been invited to do. There also may, at times, be members of the Youth Committee or Personnel Committee who can benefit from excerpts from the book to better understand the scope of the process and the anticipated timetable for hiring. A little book like this has the effect of getting everyone speaking the same language and working with the same informed expectations.

This is also a book for **SENIOR PASTORS**: In most churches, no one feels the pressure to hire well as much as the senior pastor does. Whether you as a senior pastor are leading the search yourself or delegating that task to others, it is likely that you simply don't have time personally to manage all the steps that need to be managed in a successful search. Of course, there are steps that only you can do, and we'll help you identify which those are, along with a clear step-by-step process for ensuring that all the other key details are completed.

YOU MIGHT BE ASKING...

Who are you guys?

We are youth pastors ourselves. Between us, there's over 50 years (and counting) of experience in the youth ministry world. And because we're old, we (almost weekly) hear from churches that are searching for youth pastors, and with about the same frequency, we hear horror stories of highly gifted youth workers who find themselves in impossible situations.

We have served on the lead staff of a consulting team called Youth Ministry Architects (ymarchitects.com) since 2002, providing coaching for pastors and youth pastors, assisting churches with youth pastor searches, and helping churches build healthy structures to maximize the chances of those youth pastors thriving in their roles.

Youth Ministry Architects frequently works with churches searching for new youth staff. Sometimes we get called just as a youth worker is leaving. Other times, churches call us when they wonder, after six months, if they have made the wrong hire. And still other times, churches want help moving strategically forward with a plan to adequately staff and support their youth ministry. But in every church we've served, building a healthy, well-equipped staff has been at the forefront of our work.

Are your stories true?

Well, sort of.

Based on our experience with 200 or so different churches, we've created composite stories, with new names and details. All the facts are true. We've just mixed them up to make them unrecognizable to any given church.

What is the difference between youth pastor, youth director, youth minister, and youth worker?

In different church circles, these terms can mean vastly different things. But in our little book, they all refer to the person your church will be hiring to fill a paid staff role in your youth ministry.



DON'T FORGET TO READ THE WARNING LABEL

If you sign on for the Search Team, you've signed on to do a good thing, and like most good things, it will at times be inconvenient and demanding, as well as deeply significant for the future of your church. As you read this book, probably over the space of a couple hours, you might feel overwhelmed by all the tasks before you. But you don't need to be. Remember: The tasks will be spread out over six months or so and will be shared by the good number of folks on your team.

Here's the way we think about it: If you were to sit down tonight and read all the recipes for your next six months of meals, that could feel mighty overwhelming. Consider reading this book the way you would a cookbook—skimming it at first and then just reading the chapters in depth once you get to that stage of the search.

Just remember that most shortcuts usually don't work. Though it may not feel like it now, **this resource will save you time**. We've provided you with more than 15 templates, guides, and scripts in the Appendix section (which are also available as customizable Microsoft Word® documents in the *Before You Hire a Youth Pastor Resource Pack*).

But the best way to save time in any search process is to spend a good bit of time on the front end getting all the right systems in place. Make no mistake about it. You might be able to complete your search more quickly by ignoring many of the steps we outline in this book. And there's a slim chance your gamble will pay off. But there's no guarantee.

Particularly if your church has had a lot of turnover in your youth staff (more than three youth directors in the past six years or long stretches without staff), you will want to stick closely to this process. With that level of turnover, there is likely something a little off-kilter in the systems surrounding the hiring, launching, and supporting of new youth staff. And this process will help tend to those things in ways that can vastly extend the longevity and effectiveness of your next youth worker.

Neither of us believes in gambling in youth ministry. We believe in investing. And smart investing requires a deliberate plan. If you want this search to be more than just another roll of the dice, this is the book for you.



Finally, we want to say thanks. You are about to invest your time in a process that has the potential to exponentially impact the teenagers in your church and community. You are about to bring sustainability to a process that can be very chaotic. And since you might not get a thank you note from your teenagers, we'll say it for them. Thank you for your time and your commitment. It will make a big difference in their lives—today, tomorrow, and well into the future.

BEFORE YOU START THE GAME: FIELDING YOUR A-TEAM

CHAPTER 1

“COMING TOGETHER IS A BEGINNING. KEEPING TOGETHER IS PROGRESS.
WORKING TOGETHER IS SUCCESS.”

—HENRY FORD

Not long ago, I (Mark) sat on a plane next to an assistant football coach from a major university. Ordinarily, I spend plane time working, but it was late. And since our flight had been delayed by a few hours, I fully intended to close my eyes as soon as we were in the air.

But when we touched down an hour or so later, I was still asking questions. This mountain of a man seated next to me was just returning from a recruiting trip, visiting high school sophomores and juniors. And because I am always fascinated to learn the processes leaders use to build great teams, I asked questions. Fortunately for me (and now for you), Coach was in the mood to talk.

As we talked across the empty seat between us, it wasn't long before he dropped a little rhyme into the conversation, speaking it as if I should have heard it hundreds of times before:

“Everybody talks about the Xs and the Os, but it all starts with the Jimmys and the Joes.”

This highly successful coach, whose team you would immediately recognize, was laser focused on the first step of building a successful football program: not strategy but personnel—finding the right people, for the right positions, who fit with the right team.

And so it will be for you.

The first step—before looking at a single website or résumé—will be assembling the kind of team you will need for a successful search.

Though Coach shared an hour’s worth of insights with me (many of which you’ll find scattered through the pages of this book), all that counsel can be summarized in a single statement:

“If you’re going to find and recruit great talent, it’s going to take a lot of work.”

In athletics at the college level and above, there are multiple full-time professionals trained in the fine art of scouting out great talent: researching backgrounds; interviewing teachers, coaches, and families; all the while listening between the lines for all that’s not being said.

But in youth ministry, well...

We’ve observed it over and over again. Most churches approach the search for professional youth staff with no higher priority than this: Getting it done as quickly as possible.

We want you to get your search done as quickly as possible, but speed must never be the first priority.

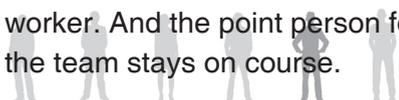
That’s why we’ve written this book.

In helping lots of churches over the years build a solid infrastructure for their youth ministries, often assisting in the hiring process, we’ve observed (and made!) plenty of unnecessary mistakes. Along the way, we’ve discovered a few nonnegotiable steps we hope you’ll choose to take in your search process.

And so, like with any building project, it only makes sense to start with step one.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY A POINT PERSON FOR THE SEARCH TEAM

The Search Team will be the group that manages the entire search process. This team will meet regularly, report frequently to church leadership, and steward the process of hiring the church’s next youth worker. And the point person for this team will be the one to ensure that the team stays on course.



Ordinarily the Search Team point person will work with the pastor to identify and recruit members of the team. He or she will be responsible for the successful launch of this process and, along with the senior pastor, will determine how to implement the steps outlined in this book.

STEP 2: ESTABLISH THE SEARCH TEAM

A solid search process does *not* begin with the search for the right candidate. It begins with the search for the right people to serve as a part of the Search Team. Though there may be many volunteers involved in the search who are not on the Search Team, it is important that this team include people who are willing and able to put in the necessary time. As a result, we recommend that the team be as small as possible but large enough to ensure that the load is not too overwhelming on any one person. A typical size for an effective Search Team is five to nine people (see Appendix A for a standard job description for the Search Team).

It will be important for those who agree to serve on this team to recognize that this will be a working team, *not an advice-giving team*. Important stakeholders in the youth ministry and church who only have time to give advice can be invited to provide input during the interview process, but those who serve on this team will be responsible for the load-bearing work of the search process. Each team member will be expected to take on weekly assignments that will move the search process deliberately forward.

STEP 3: ORIENT TEAM MEMBERS TO THEIR WORK

Once the team has been drafted, it will be time for the first “practice.” In this first meeting, the team members will be introduced to the structure of the search process and will make a number of decisions about the ways they will work together, including:

- How often will the team meet?
- What roles will each member of the Search Team play? (See Step 8.)
- How will we engage support teams (see Step 8) in the search process?



- Who are the most important stakeholders to include on support teams?
- If necessary, determine what opportunities the Search Team will provide for appropriate people to process emotions related to the most recent youth staff departure. (See Step 7.)

BEFORE YOU SETTLE: PREPARING FOR AN *ABNORMAL* SEARCH

CHAPTER 2

“THE TYPICAL MISTAKE IS TO RUSH THE HIRING PROCESS, WHICH MEANS YOU’LL GET TO DO IT AGAIN SIX MONTHS AND FORTY THOUSAND DOLLARS FROM NOW.”

—MIKE WOODRUFF, *MANAGING YOUTH MINISTRY CHAOS*²

When people ask for our most important piece of search advice, it all starts with two simple words: “Don’t settle.” Or pictured graphically:



The failure of the Johnson City United Church search was that they did just the opposite. They settled for a process that didn’t require too much of the search committee. They settled for vague expectations for the work of the youth director. They settled for doing little or nothing to ensure that appropriate accountability structures would be in place to align their new youth director with the vision of the church. They settled for, well, being “normal.”

Johnson City United Church simply conducted a normal search for a youth director—and they got predictably normal results. You are reading this book because you want your search to be *abnormal*. You want to avoid the wasted energy and money that are always bound up in a “normal” youth pastor search. And perhaps the best way to help you avoid

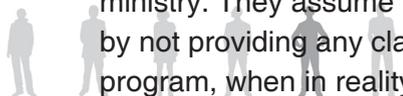
a normal search is to provide a clear picture of what such a thing actually looks like.

STEP 4: UNDERSTAND THE TELLTALE SIGNS OF A “NORMAL” SEARCH

If you were like most kids growing up, you were ready to drive before you were *ready to drive*. You were likely impatient to get behind the wheel, impatient with taking the required drivers education classes, impatient with learning all the things you could do to avoid getting in an accident.

If right now, you are feeling similar emotions, we understand. But before your team actually gets behind the wheel, we want to make sure you know the eight traps we’ve seen a “normal” Search Team fall victim to:

1. **Hoping, wishing, and praying:** The normal youth pastor Search Team does little to prepare for or structure the search process. They post the opening, typically without a job description, a budget, or a timeline, repeating the comforting mantra, “How hard can it be?”
2. **Embracing “Superstar” mentality:** The normal Search Team works with the assumption that the new youth director can and should solve all of the problems related to the current youth ministry—and create no new ones! The Search Team members compliment themselves on “empowering” the new youth worker by not “saddling” him or her with any volunteers, planning teams, or calendars.
3. **Obsessing on the “Golden Age:”** Some searches are launched amid tremendous grief over the loss of the church’s most recent youth director (or sometimes one or two youth directors back). The focus of the church becomes trying to find another Jimmy, another Melissa, another Jose.
4. **Stalling in terminal vagueness:** The normal church, to borrow from the language of *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, rushes out to hire “a dancer” before ever “building the dance floor” for the youth ministry. They assume that they serve the new youth pastor best by not providing any clarity about the desired direction for the program, when in reality the best candidates appreciate a clear



vision from the church. As a result, the youth minister at a “normal” church steps into his or her position with exactly zero measurable markers of what the church will view as effective ministry.

5. **Not preparing for the onset of weariness:** The normal Search Team is prepared for a sprint, not a marathon. The normal Search Team gathers a set of 10 or so résumés, has a few phone appointments, invites the top candidates in to interview, and then settles on hiring what will later be described as “the best of the weak candidates available.”
6. **Failing to ask the hard questions:** A normal Search Team ignores the hard questions and, by doing so, dramatically increases the likelihood of unpleasant surprises early in the new youth worker’s tenure. Hard questions include:
 - Have candid exit interviews been completed with youth staff members who have departed in the past five years, and have we identified what it was about the structure of their positions that may have caused them to leave when they did?
 - What kind of support structures will be in place for the new youth staff that weren’t in place for our previous youth staff?
 - Do our expectations for the capacity and results of our youth ministry match the investment we are choosing to make in its success?

STEP 5: DEVELOP A SOURCING STRATEGY

Few aspects of a successful search are more often neglected than this one. And ironically, no single aspect of the search process will have nearly as profound an impact on the attitude of the Search Team as this one will.

Sourcing is, simply put, the process of talking to as many people as possible about the position, knowing that some percentage of those contacts will just happen to know someone (or know someone who knows someone) who might be a strong candidate for the open position. As

strange as it may sound, sourcing is all about quantity, not quality. The ideal youth ministry search typically involves making a minimum of at least 200 sourcing contacts, though 500 would be far better!

Do the math with me: If team members talk to 100 possible sources, and 10 percent of them have a candidate to recommend (a fairly strong response rate), the result will be 10 potential candidates. By comparison, we like the churches we work with to have 20 to 50 decent candidates they have considered before starting the interviewing process.

Instead, the “normal” church starts interviewing with a small pool of candidates that no one is really all that excited about, often leaving Search Team members feeling desperate, wringing their hands, and complaining about how few strong candidates there are. This sense of desperation is often the primary reason churches choose to settle, rather than wait for the candidate who is an appropriate fit for the church’s needs. We’d much prefer that you approach your decision making with the confidence that a big stack of good résumés can provide.

We know what you’re asking next: “So where do we go to expand our list of sources?”

Your Search Team can choose from any of the following options. Use as many as you can:

- Publicly invite the entire church to submit names and contact information for anyone they know who might *either* be a strong candidate or someone who might know a strong candidate.
- Have everyone on the Search Team contact at least 10 friends who:
 - Are involved in the world of youth ministry in some other church
 - Are involved in ministry of some kind
 - Are in churches that have strong youth ministries
 - Have a strong connection with a Christian camp or college
- Ask each of the members of the church staff for recommendations of possible sources that the Search Team should be talking to.

- Contact the church’s denomination or association headquarters for the names and contact information of potential sources. (A great question would be, “Who are 10 people in our denomination that are doing great youth ministry these days?”)
- Depending on the ideal age of the candidate you are seeking, you may want to contact all colleges that provide a youth ministry major to ask for their recommendations.
- If you are searching for a candidate with a seminary degree, you will want to contact feeder seminaries for churches like yours.
- Contact Christian camps within your general area (or around the country) for names of people who have served as counselors in recent years who might be searching for a youth ministry position.
- Have everyone on the Search Team scan online for *names* in youth ministry that seem to occur over and over again, and contact those people for recommendations.

In addition, we recommend that every Search Team select at least 10 “sourcers” who aren’t on the Search Team but might be willing to make 10 contacts of their own.

At this point in the process, the Search Team will want to determine its sourcing strategy and set a target number of sources that the team and its recruits will talk to before actually starting the interview process.

You can get a jump start by assigning someone the job of checking with some of our favorite sources—the online job banks at SimplyYouthMinistryTools.com/jobs, YouthSpecialties.com, YMArchitects.com, and HireAYouthPastor.com.

STEP 6: CRAFT YOUR TEAM’S “ELEVATOR SPEECH”

Now that your team has spent many hours building the foundation for your search, you are ready to create what we call your “elevator speech.” This is the brief explanation of your church, the kind of person you are searching for, and the unique opportunities in your particular church. As the name suggests, this is a pitch short enough to give during a short elevator ride—about 20 seconds.

A good elevator speech keeps your team on the same page and ensures constancy in the messages that are being given to sources, candidates, and references. You will want to write it down and share it with the whole team, with your “sourcers,” and in conversation with all the candidates your interview.

Unfortunately, most teams’ elevator speeches sounds something like this:

We are a great church in a wonderful city! We have tremendous youth in need of a committed person who can lead our youth ministry.

Compare that elevator speech to this:

First Church is willing to invest in youth ministry. Having just doubled the size of our youth staff, we are seeking a highly creative high school director to focus primarily on our weekly outreach program to youth outside our church walls. Because we have a diverse staff, this person will be relatively free from logistical details and will be able to focus primarily on relationships.

Or this:

We are a theologically conservative church with a progressive worship style in search of an ordained youth pastor to lead our active and committed group of volunteers. The focus of our youth ministry is discipling students who will, in turn, impact their friends and families. We already have most of the key volunteers in place.

STEP 7: IDENTIFY UNFINISHED BUSINESS FROM THE MOST RECENT YOUTH STAFF DEPARTURE

It is a rare search that has no residual concerns related to the departure of the most recent youth worker. It is normal for students, parents, and leaders to feel a wide range of often conflicting emotions—grief, fear, anger, sadness, relief. The normal church provides very little opportunity for processing these emotions in healthy ways; as a result, those emotions go underground, often surfacing in sabotaging ways for the next youth director.

It is for this reason that the abnormal Search Team will want to consider, as a part of its process, creating a space for listening and gathering input from students, parents, and leaders who simply need a place to process

all they are feeling related to the current transition. This processing could take place in a town hall meeting, in focus groups, or in one-on-one meetings with those who may have deep-seated emotions related to the previous youth pastor, the processes surrounding his or her departure, and the future of the youth ministry. In each setting it will be important for the team to provide a relaxed setting for listening, especially for those who might have felt the most deeply wounded. This will also be the place for the team to transparently communicate how the search process will take place.

BEYOND “ONE MORE TIME—THE WAY IT’S NEVER WORKED BEFORE”

Leaders at Epiphany Church had done all the normal things. They had posted the job at local colleges. They had scoured the Internet. They prayed and hoped and worried. Nearly a year later, they had a handful of OK résumés, none of which had them dancing in the aisles.

They refused to settle, though, and during this season of waiting, they set some three-year goals and built a great team of volunteer leaders. They also hired a part-time person they called “the organized mom” who made sure the ministry kept moving—that vans were rented and events were publicized. In month 10 of the search, just as everyone was growing weary, the Search Team agreed to reboot the search process and go back to sourcing again (something they had done halfheartedly months earlier). Team members all agreed to “call a dozen contacts, no matter how far-fetched, just to see what happens.”

Jean called a friend at her old church, hundreds of miles away, and said, “Who do you know?” That’s how they found Molly. She was the daughter of a friend of a friend, working part time at a small church, and she was ready for the next step in her ministry. Molly turned out to be the perfect fit for Epiphany, and five years later, she is still there. So are the “organized mom” and almost the entire group of fantastic volunteers.

If your church chooses to run an abnormal search for a youth pastor, there’s a very good chance you’ll experience abnormal results. You may just have a youth worker who stays more than the disappointingly normal minimal tenure. You may just hire a youth pastor who is able to hit the ground running rather than spending the first year plowing new ground.

You may just hear a steady drumbeat of teenagers and families and youth leaders aligned and moving powerfully in the same direction.

Our hope for your church is that this search experience lays the groundwork for a deliberate process that can be used again and again. The *abnormal* church doesn't simply search; it builds a sustainable search process.

Ironically, the churches that use this process (and have it in place for future searches) are the very same churches that tend to need it the least.

Now, let's get to work.