

Becoming a Relational Youth Minister

John M. Rinaldo

The key to good youth ministry is not the quality or the quantity of programs and events, but is the quality of the relationships the youth ministry volunteer leaders build with the teens and their families. Youth ministry volunteers and coordinators should be relational ministers. Meaning, their goal is to genuinely care for young people. Relational youth ministry is built on love; love for God and love for our youth. Quality events are a by-product of good relationships with young people.

It takes some work to be a good relational youth minister. Whether you are a volunteer, coordinator, parent, pastor, or an adult who cares, I am convinced that all of us can learn the skills it takes to build long lasting relationships with the young people we serve. A few key steps go a long way to make young people feel wanted, encouraged, and truly welcome in our church.

1. Know their name

There has been more than one occasion that a young person has come up to me and said, “Hey, bet you don’t remember my name?” Unfortunately, there are times when they are right. Nothing means more to a young person than a caring adult remembering their name. Their name is their identity. Not remembering their name, from their point of view, is like not knowing who they are, period. Take the extra moment it takes and do what you must to remember their name. Some may write the name on their hand, or say the name as many times as they can in the conversation. Nametags can work for a short time, but don’t rely on them. Teens (and adults) recognize when you know their name or have to look at their nametag all the time. What works best for me is to know their story. The more of their story I know, the more likely I will be to remember their name.

2. Ask good questions

Dale Carnegie, in his famous book *How To Win Friends and Influence People*, said “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.” The key to being interested is to ask good questions. What’s their story? Who are they? What are their hobbies? What do they like to do? Everyone loves to talk about him or herself. Our job as relational youth ministers is to allow young people to share with us their passions and joys, their pain and struggle. This cannot happen if we never open the door to that conversation. Most teens I know will not come up to me and spill their guts about their lives. It is up to us to take the initiative. The most important part of asking good questions is to remember their answers and follow up with them.

3. Step in to their world

Relational youth ministers take the time to occasionally step into the world of young people. That could mean going to their theatre performance or sports competition, visiting them at their place of work or just hanging out with them and getting a cup of coffee. When

we step into their world, it shows them that we care about them and are willing to make an effort to get to know them better as a unique individual.

4. Be encouraging

We must realize the following:

- Most young people don't have faith in themselves
- Most young people don't have someone who has faith in them
- Most young people can tell when someone else has faith in them
- Most young people will do anything to live up to your faith in them

Our job as relational youth ministers is to see the potential in them and verbalize it. If young people cannot get the encouragement they need from the adults at church, where will they get that encouragement? We can only do this if we have taken the time to ask good questions and have discovered their strengths and abilities. Our young people are hungering for attention and positive encouragement. Let us genuinely care and encourage them.

5. Don't pretend to know it all

John C. Maxwell is famous for saying that "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." There is even more truth to that statement when working with teenagers. Our job as relational youth ministers is not to teach or preach at them and let them know how smart we are. Young people can see right through that. Someone once said that we only need to know three things: 1) what we do know; 2) what we don't know; and 3) where to go to get the answers to the things we don't know. There will be times for teaching, mentoring, and advice giving. Learn to recognize when that time is. First, make sure that they know you truly care about them.

6. Play with them

Remember when you were a kid and much of your recess, lunch, and after school was spent in play? It didn't matter with whom. We just played and we had fun. Our young people want to play, too. We need to be relational youth ministers that can just be a kid again and play, whether that be a crazy community builder or dodge ball. I used to play lava monster on the jungle gym with my high school leadership teens. We loved it and we bonded through the experience. The famous philosopher, Plato, once said "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." A relational youth minister does not sit in the back of the room while our young people are "playing." We must join in. You will find that you will love it. The young people will find you more relatable. Allow yourself to step out of your comfort zone and just play like you did when you were a kid.

Take the time to be a relational youth minister. Your youth ministry will thrive for it and you will find that those relationships will not only be life-giving to the young people, but to you as well.