

The State of Our Youth

1 Timothy 4:12-15

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When Tom told Tiffany and me that we would be preaching in his absence this summer, several emotions came over me, but mostly I was excited. I was happy to be able to provide Tom with a much needed rest, and I was looking forward to the opportunity to speak with the congregation of Knox. This is not my first sermon to the Knox congregation. I am quite sure most of you must remember that beautiful Sunday morning in 1996 when a member of that years senior class delivered a sermon at Youth Sunday about how we all must “Shine Like Stars” in the sometimes darkness of our world. It was a most stirring talk to be sure. After thinking over what I should speak about today, I came to the conclusion that it is not often that I am able to update you on the status, progress and overall health of what it is I am charged to oversee. This could be an opportunity for me to reflect on the Ministry of Knox towards our young people; and for all of us to take stock of what we do well in this area, and where we could improve. So this morning, I am pleased to present to you, an address on the State of Our Youth here at Knox.

A few weeks back, I wrote in my weekly inspiration about how the internet has changed the game completely for youth ministry. Even in the years that I have been at Knox, the way I communicate and interact with the youth has shifted. When I first arrived, a phone call and direct mail, were the best ways to try to get information out to our group. Soon after, email had taken hold and became the preferred method of choice. Presently, the communication of the youth group is dominated by Facebook and text messaging. It is wonderful to be able to get a hold of the kids so quickly and to spread the word so efficiently about what we are up to at youth group. With the dominance of the internet, the ability of Youth Workers to connect with each other has also become incredibly easy. With a simple click of the mouse, I am now able to share ideas, stories and questions with my colleagues from around the world. As I began this review of the State of Our Youth, I first headed to the internet to see how it is that my fellow youth workers would go about evaluating the overall health of a youth ministry.

Upon first glance, it seems that a youth ministries’ success and effectiveness can be determined easily. The most popular method of evaluation is numbers. Because youth ministry success is not easy to gauge on its own, we often fall back on something that is more tangible to us... numbers. “How many youth attended your last event?” “What were your numbers for the mission trip?” “How many kids are on your mailing list versus how many show up on Sundays?” These are but a few of the questions that people will pose to try to gain a perspective on how a youth ministry is doing. The theory of course being, the more numbers involved, the more successful the youth program. A popular phrase among youth workers is that “Kids vote with their feet” meaning, if they are in attendance, then you are doing something right. There is some truth to this, and by this measure, Knox has a very successful Youth Ministry program going. Our numbers here have grown steadily over the past decade, and have held true even as church numbers across the country continue to dwindle. Our first trip to Montreat ten years ago included five youth and has grown over the past decade to see upwards of sixty youth attend the conference. It would be easy for me to go with this method of numbers today, call our ministry very healthy, and move things along to Lemonade on the Lawn, but I cannot do that. You see, I feel that this

theory gives little information about the true underlying health of a youth ministry. Not only that, but I also feel that this theory can be a dangerous way to look at a program. It is very possible that a large youth ministry is a healthy one, but it is also possible for a small ministry to be just as healthy and effective and successful, and that is something that can be lost in a numbers game. Greg Bolt, a youth pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Bend, Oregon wrote on his blog, "In a society that is looking for quantifiable success "deepening faith" is hard to measure. I also agree it is not about the numbers. I believe if you are authentic, real, and open numbers are things that can come from that, but I wish that my brain didn't always go back to numbers." If youth programs that are low in numbers are deemed to be unsuccessful, they run the risk of not being supported, and ultimately disappearing. When this happens, the churches and youth involved are invariably hurt in the process. The numbers theory applied to our current group would produce a pleasing take on our ministry, however that same method applied to the Knox youth group when that senior I spoke of gave his message in 1996 would have deemed us very unsuccessful. For most of my time as a high school student here, our youth group consisted of Kelly Duke, myself and four of my friends from Walnut Hills High School. Kelly and I were the only members of Knox, and in fact the only youth with families who attended Knox. The fact that we had very low numbers did not matter to Glen Rogers, or Jill Moormann who gave of their time and talents as our youth leaders. It did not stop the congregation of Knox from supporting us and every event we did. It did not stop Glen from piling us in a van and driving us all the way to Homestead, Florida so that we could help rebuild houses after hurricane Andrew. We were never given up on... and though at a glance it didn't look like a very successful youth ministry, it meant everything to me in those young formative years of my life. I attended every week, and learned more about my faith, and myself than I ever thought was possible. By the numbers theory, that youth ministry was unsuccessful, but being a youth IN that ministry, I knew otherwise. It was an effective and extremely healthy place for me to be with the questions I was facing at the time. Numbers are to be noted, but they are not to be used as a final measure of success.

Perhaps then, we should take a step back and look at the events of the Knox Youth Group. It seems like this would be the next easiest way to gauge the success and effectiveness of a youth ministry. What a group is doing, the reaction to the events, and the impact that they have can tell you a lot about the ministries' purpose and goals. Indeed, this can also be a barometer of success... but it can also be very misleading. I have found over the years, this is because people's definition of success is often very different. There is a youth pastor named Doug who shares this story about an event he did early in his ministry:

"On Monday following camp, I went into the church office eager to share the news with the church staff and hear the praise reports that I anticipated had been coming in all morning. As I approached the church office, my insecurity and pride mixed to create a fantasy in which I envisioned the staff awaiting my arrival and lining the entrance for congratulations and a chorus of "How Great Thou Art."

My fantasy bubble popped when the church administrator immediately asked, "Did you know our megaphone was busted this weekend and the church vans weren't returned to their proper parking spots?" I didn't know how to respond. I was speechless (which was a small miracle). This wasn't the greeting I had expected. In my state of shock, I stuttered something about reparking the vans and buying

a new megaphone. Then I hung my head and walked to my office. As I sat at my desk, I thought, “Does resignation have one s or two?” Just then I received a phone call from a student’s mother. I assumed that she was calling to thank me for her son’s life-changing weekend. Instead, she said, “Doug, I have some problems with your leadership at camp this weekend.” She went on to explain that the only story she had heard from her son was how the boys were lying around in their underwear one night passing gas on lit matches and laughing at the appearance of flames. She continues to chastise me for how irresponsible and dangerous that was – saying the boys could actually explode. (All I could think of was what a great video that would make!) I guess she thought it was one of our planned events as opposed to a random act of teenage silliness. Either way, I became the object of her anger.

I had been in the office for ten minutes, and already I had had two negative conversations regarding one of my best weekends of ministry. I left the office immediately. As I drove home, I couldn’t contain my emotions and began to weep...”

By Doug’s definition, the event was a huge success, but by parents and staff’s definition it was anything but. Doug did not end up quitting... in fact, he is now one of the most visible and successful youth workers in the world. Doug Fields has written many books, runs his own company “Simply Youth Ministry” and travels around the world giving advice and helping youth workers with their own situations.

Contrast that story, with this story of my own. I began as a youth volunteer here at Knox, but my first full time Youth Director job was at Montgomery Presbyterian Church here in Cincinnati. I was working for a pastor that I loved and that supported me so I began to brainstorm with the kids about wild things that they wanted to try that would help us raise money for a summer trip and would maybe make us stand out a bit to get their friends interested. After much discussion, the kids decided that they wanted to do the now infamous “Flamingo Fundraiser” which we did here at Knox several years back as well. If you are not familiar with this particular fundraiser, the congregation would get the opportunity to have the kids “flamingo” the yard of another congregant at an unspecified time. The idea being, one morning your “victim” wakes up to a yard full of pink birds making them the object of fun and ridicule for the whole neighborhood. Said “victim” would then have the opportunity to “hire” the youth of the church to remove the dangerous birds from their yard. There are more twists involved like Flamingo insurance and such, but I digress. We spent many weeks gathering materials together, mapping out our routes, and selling to the congregation. The evening had finally come that we were going to secretly flamingo the victim’s yards. We gathered at the home of one of the youth, and at my request the kids showed up wearing all black clothes. We even had face paint and dark hats so as to completely blend in with the night and remain stealthy. I was having so much fun in my first big event as a real youth director that I didn’t think some things through. We had two vehicles, a mini-van and a big white van that I rented. We loaded the birds in the white van, and some kids piled in the back with the birds while the rest smashed into the mini-van. We were off, and things were going well. We crawled our way into lawns, kept out of sight, and put the birds into place. As the night progressed though, the kids got more and more excited and thus the noise level picked up considerably. Despite my constant pleading for them to be quiet, they constantly forgot and ended up yelling to each other and making tons of noise. This is now around midnight mind you in the community of Montgomery where things are usually calm and quiet after

7pm. Well, I'm not sure if it was the noise we were making, or the fact that a bunch of high school kids all dressed in black were running through yards, but eventually the police were called on us. I was unaware of this until a cop car pulled me over lights, siren and all. The police officer got out of his car and walked up to my window. Here I was, a guy in his mid twenties, driving a windowless white van at midnight through Montgomery, dressed in all black, with a group of kids in the back of the van. It was probably the longest twenty seconds of my life as the officer walked from his car to mine. I started to update my resume in my head with the free time I had in that moment thinking I would need it very soon! The officer proceeded to tell me that they had gotten a call about noise complaints and that the description was an unmarked white van with lots of people dressed in black. Well, we were the only unmarked white van out at that hour, so we weren't too hard to find. I proceeded to tell the officer that we were a church youth group and were doing a fundraiser. When I told him the details he actually laughed and said he wished we could have us "flamingo his neighbor, that would get him good!" He told us to keep it down a little and to have fun and we were off. Needless to say, I was relieved to be off the hook legally, but thought that my career might still be very much on the hook.

While I expected to be reprimanded from my boss and the parents, what I ended up getting was a lot of laughs at the story, a big lesson to learn from, and an event that was successful beyond my wildest dreams! The kids all had a blast, and in retrospect it was that event that really brought them together as a group, and allowed us to do a lot of the things that we did that year. The events that a group does are but a snapshot of a larger picture, and can often be misleading and are seen in different ways by different observers. Once again, Knox's youth ministry program would be considered very successful and effective when using this program based evaluation. In fact, with this system of review, we could reduce our program year to a kick off in the fall, followed by a Christmas party, then do a musical, follow that up with our Senior Banquet and then on to Montreat. These perennially successful events would put our youth ministry in a great place with this review method. Anyone involved in youth ministry will be able to rebuke this system of judgment with ease however, by explaining how the success of these events does not occur in an isolated environment. They could tell you how the relationships built throughout the year contribute. That the contact with leaders and support from parents contribute. That the encouragement from the congregation and quite, small conversations with those the youth look up to contribute. Countless things combine throughout the year to make the ministry what it is, and allow these events to be successful and effective at all. But to an even deeper degree, successful events are not what we are after here. We are talking about a ministry... so how do we gauge our level of success with THAT in its entirety?

I think we need to take another step back and look at things as a whole. We take into account the numbers, the programs, the events, and all the other things we can quantify, and try to use them to help us. I propose that a successful youth ministry propagates itself in three main ways: By enhancing a youth's relationship with God, by enhancing a youth's relationship with those around them, and by enhancing a youth's relationship with themselves. Applying these criteria, let us take a look at our ministry.

The first objective of any church entity is to further a relationship with the Lord. Our youth at Knox receive a solid foundation with which to work before they ever come to the youth program. It is through

the volunteer efforts of the congregation that Sunday School and Confirmation class are able to teach them the vital stories of our faith, and start them on their life long journey. What we want to determine is if there is evidence of that faith building and their relationship with God growing once they enter the youth program. An easy first place to look is each June when we travel to Montreat. During this trip each summer, God takes a front seat for an entire week of the youth's lives. School, sports and other priorities during the year are put aside for a bit and they spend the days talking about faith, about their walk with God, about other things they might not feel comfortable bringing up in the settings of their everyday lives. This trip has been an incredible blessing to us as a ministry. It has allowed our youth to make their faith seen and known. It has allowed them to talk about God and not feel like an outcast. It has changed many of them and the leaders who have gone. I think we have seen this year after year by hearing some of the things the kids have told us on that Sunday when we report back. We only have time each year to let you hear a couple of stories, but I wish you could read all of the things that are written at the end of that trip.

Montreat is a large opportunity for us to see faith development in our youth, but there are many smaller instances throughout the year that give us just as clear a picture into their journey. Bible studies have been formed and led by youth, who many times end up teaching me things through their unique take on scripture. The commitment that our young people make to the church with each confirmation class is a huge statement of how they feel about religion in their lives. We have even been witness in recent weeks to a youth who was the first in her family to be baptized and join the church. She did this after being in the youth program for four years and deciding that she wanted to go even deeper and make a commitment to God's work. What an amazing statement that was. Our youth here at Knox are very open and honest about where they are on their journey of faith... something I think we see each year at Youth Sunday when the seniors give a message. The honesty of the youth toward the subjects of God, faith and religion as a whole lets us know that they take it seriously, and actually value finding their way. It would be very easy for them to say they love God, that they have a strong faith, and all the other things they know adults would love to hear a youth say, but it is harder to express that you have doubts... that your journey is not one long mountaintop. This is the sign of a maturing faith, and this open and honest dialogue, and the fact that the kids continue to search tells a lot about how important God, and a true relationship with God is to them. A successful youth ministry does not require that all youth in its ranks have a perfect relationship with God, it requires that we provide for the youth a safe and constructive environment for them to question, to pray, to search, to learn and to teach. This is the path to a true and lasting relationship with the Lord, and this is what we strive to provide at Knox.

So is this growing faith in our youth manifesting itself in an outward direction? Do we see an enhancing relationship in our youth with those around them? The friendships that we see on a weekly basis in the youth group are second to none. Many of our youth have made lifelong friendships within these walls, and with people they may have never met before, were it not for Knox's youth ministry. These are the types of relationships that stand up against the tests of life... some small and others too large to comprehend. They are the kind of relationships that are there when a youth loses a parent... when a youth is hospitalized... when a youth has parents divorce... when they lose a friend their own age... when family members have cancer... when they or a friend are thinking of hurting themselves. I have seen the

relationships between the youth and with the youth leaders stand up to some of the darkest, scariest places we ever have to face in life.... And they continued to stand. A successful youth ministry becomes a safety net to those who are in need of help when they are falling. Not only do I believe Knox has this kind of system in place... I have seen it work over and over again.

The blessing of these interpersonal relationships becomes even more effective when it is taken outside of the walls of the church. The qualifier “Those around them” does not simply mean their friends and family, but it means all of their brothers and sisters of the world. Knox has always had a very generous heart when it comes to mission, and these efforts reflect nicely in our youth program. Our kids started a mission day at Montreat last year that was so successful, it has grown into a full program open to all churches at this year’s Montreat youth conference. The kids can be found throughout the year raking leaves for members in need of a hand, singing carols or helping to lead worship at area retirement communities, planting grass around the Knox grounds, hosting a MEAC Feed and Seed, supporting a child in Kenya through World Vision, and much more...and despite all these efforts in a recent meeting with our youth deacons, they asked to do MORE mission work this coming year. Our youth are hungry to share the blessings of God with those around them, and are a constant source of inspiration for me personally of how I should do the same.

Finally this morning, I ask, are the youth enhanced in their relationship with themselves? Have we done enough to make an impact in their personal lives? Has the Knox Youth Ministry made a difference to the youth who have come through it? I was already able to share with you how it touched me personally as a youth, and I can tell you that it still does to this very day. This is the most powerful way of hearing the effect something has had on a person, from a first hand account. One of the successful programs I mentioned earlier this morning was the Senior Banquet. For the past five years, we have taken time each May to honor our senior class and their families. It is one of my very favorite events, complete with a special movie the kids make each year. That is the fun part. What comes after though is a slideshow of pictures of each senior, and an audio interview that runs underneath. In addition to some fun and funny questions, the seniors are asked “What do Knox and the Youth Group mean to you?” I think the best way to hear the impact you have had on our youth is from them first hand...

VIDEO CLIP PLAYED HERE. YOU CAN VIEW IT ON THE KNOX WEBSITE

<http://www.knox.org/video/2009/stateofouryouth/>

Friends, the State of Our Youth is good....

The State of Our Youth is very good indeed.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.