

GUIDE

FOR VOLUNTEERS



J.

JESUS CENTERED YOUTH MINISTRY

MOVING FROM JESUS-PLUS TO JESUS-ONLY

Group



RICK LAWRENCE

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Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry: Guide for Volunteers

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DEDICATION

To the hundreds of thousands of everyday people who work all day at a “normal” job, then give of their precious margin-time to hang out with teenagers—all because you love Jesus and love them. You are my heroes.



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INTRODUCTION

My intent is to help you reorient the way you understand and participate in youth ministry—from a “Jesus-plus” approach to a “Jesus-only” approach. By this I mean moving from a focus that’s kinda/sorta about Jesus to one that *breathes* him. And at the beginning, we can’t avoid the question that sits like an elephant in our living room:

“What’s the big deal about ‘Jesus-Centered’—isn’t ministry, by definition, already about focusing on Jesus?”

At the core of this little guide to Jesus-centered youth ministry is this truth: We aren’t “focusing on Jesus” the way we think we are. People involved in ministry, by and large, have unwittingly and subtly and often forgotten that Jesus is at the center of everything.

It’s hard to admit that we’ve forgotten Jesus in our commonly accepted approaches to ministry and discipleship and Bible study, but the fruits of those conventional practices are drowning out our good intentions. We’ve unconsciously taken Jesus for granted in the rich excess of Western Christian culture. We’ve functionally moved on to bigger, better things that seem more relevant to the challenges facing the church: new and innovative church structures, ministry approaches that appeal to postmodern and even post-Christian

young people, and social concerns that resonate with globally aware students.

But if a ministry's focus on Jesus is really akin to breathing, then the evidence suggests that most churches, and most youth ministries, are using a ventilator to stay alive. They don't *breathe Jesus* with the force of their own passionate impetus. We'll explore the truth about this impossible reality from many vantage points, because the impossible has happened in the Western church. But more importantly, we'll discover together what a *Jesus-centered ministry* actually looks and sounds and tastes like.

BORED BY EVERYTHING BUT JESUS

A decade ago, I was invited to speak at a youth ministry conference hosted by a very large church in the Midwest. The organizers asked me to lead a two-hour pre-conference session for youth workers who wanted something a little deeper, a little more revolutionary. At the time, I was experimenting with a training idea that focused every aspect of youth ministry on a deepening attachment to Jesus. As we explored the possibilities together, a subtle shift of atmosphere grew in the room. By the end of those two hours, that little gathering of 30 or so youth workers had become a runaway worship-train. We were crying and laughing and hungry for more

of Jesus. At the end, some people in the room with many long years of ministry on their résumé waited in line to tell me a sobering revelation: that they'd never really tasted deeply of Jesus and had never appreciated his height and depth and breadth. I understood exactly what they were trying to say.

So when I emerged from that two-hour training session that had morphed into something much bigger and better, my appetite for Jesus was voracious. And with my leadership responsibilities completed, I was free to roam the rest of the conference, popping into as many workshops and general sessions as I could cram in. I listened to many of the best experts in youth ministry that day, all of them brilliant and many of them longtime friends. But by the end of the day, I felt a growing restlessness—a reaction to a *deadening* in my soul as I tried to process the onslaught of ministry “tips and techniques.”

As evening settled in, that deadness had spread into a kind of depression, so I found an empty, overstuffed chair in the huge and bustling atrium. I needed to pray, and it was easy to isolate myself in the middle of the throng. In my “cone of silence,” I asked a simple question: “Why, why, why, Jesus, am I feeling this way?” Tears streamed down my face, and pain was in my eyes. And then, in one of those moments when the voice of Jesus is crystal clear, he said this to me:

“You’re bored by everything but me now.”

I knew it was true as soon as I heard it. Great strategies and tested principles for ministry are fine; they just can’t replace the intoxicating presence of Jesus. If you showed up at a cooking class and discovered Oprah was teaching it, you’d probably be less impressed with her recipes and more interested in...*her*. I’d always defined discipleship as a progression that looked a lot like doing well in school—studying hard, growing in knowledge, doing well on “tests.” But those things, I realized, now paled in comparison to the undeniable truth: True disciples are captured and carried away by Jesus. They are so “stuck” on him that the natural outcome of their attachment to him is a perpetual willingness to give over their life to him. They are ruined by Jesus and ruined for Jesus.

When Jesus is the center of everything, and when people are drawn into closer orbit around him, fruit happens. That’s just the way things work. The rest of this book serves as a welcome mat into a whole new reality. Walk through this door and you’ll discover a new way of leading and loving students that feels simpler and more purposeful. And along the way, you’ll find what your soul has always craved.

CHAPTER ONE



Problem? What Problem?



“Holy Bat-Signal, Batman!” —Robin

The central question of the book the WWJD frenzy was based on, Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps*,¹ is simple: “If Christians are supposed to be following Jesus, why aren’t they making more of an impact in their daily lives?” The book’s answer was to imagine what everyday life might be like if all of us simply talked and acted more like Jesus. Well, that *would* change everything, but as far as I could tell during the 1990s from my perch as editor of Group Magazine, the What Would Jesus Do movement *hadn’t* changed everything.

There are two inherent problems at the core of WWJD:

1. Our guesses about what Jesus *would do* in our contemporary circumstances are directly tied to how well we know and understand *what he’s already done*, and our record there is pretty bad.
2. Jesus was fundamentally unpredictable—he’s the most surprising person you’ll ever know. It’s hard to predict what surprising people *will do*, but that doesn’t mean it’s hard to *know their heart*.

ROMANCE VS. ROTE

People who are caught up in a romantic relationship don't have to be told to focus on their beloved; it's hard to stop thinking about the person, actually. No matter what we're doing or who we're with, our thoughts stray to the object of our passion. To use the language of C.H. Spurgeon (more on him later), our life is "beelined" to our beloved. But it isn't the momentum of a "should"—it's the attraction of a lover. There's an enormous distinction between the two.

Teenagers today are staying away from church—or leaving it altogether—because so many of them have been "shoulded" into a relationship with God or the church. If they, instead, had a kind of romantic attachment to Jesus—a passion for him that created a beeline momentum in their life—they'd not only stay connected to the church, they'd also bring a bunch of their friends with them.

The body of Christ in Western culture is facing an emergency. More than 200,000 churches in the United States are in decline. Every year, more than 4,000 of them close their doors for good. The people who've stuck with the church have a higher average age than the general population, and if you backtrack through the generations you'll find that the younger people are, the less likely they are to be connected with a church.

Of course, the United States continues to be a “Christian nation,” with 95 percent of Americans believing in God. But the most generous estimate of the percentage of people who still attend church regularly is 40 percent, and the real weekly attendance figure is almost certainly closer to 17 percent (the number pegged by researchers who actually count Sunday attenders). And here’s the real kick in the gut: In the space of just five years, the percentage of teenagers attending church every week has plummeted by 25 percent (from 20 percent to 15 percent).²

All our conventional responses to this steamrolling crisis have missed the mark. We’ve tried to become more relevant, more glitzy, more tolerant, more technologically savvy, more flexible, more professional, more sophisticated, more purpose-driven, more comprehensive, more socially aware, more...more. But all our “mores” have done nothing to reverse the trend of disengagement.

THE DISAPPEARING JESUS

I was talking with a junior high girl who’d just served as a leader in a churchwide worship experience during Holy Week. She’d spent several days leading people from her congregation into a deeper relationship with Jesus through an interactive devotional experience. The girl

was giddy with excitement about the whole thing. I told her I like to ask teenagers to describe Jesus to me—just because I’m curious about how they see him.

“So,” I asked, “what are some words you’d use to describe Jesus to someone who’s never heard of him?”

She scrunched her forehead and tried to wrestle that question to the ground. Finally, she offered this hopeful response: “Well, I’d have to say he’s really, really nice.”

She was ready to leave it right there, so I asked: “Remember that time Jesus made a whip and chased all the money changers out of the Temple? Does that story change the way you’d describe Jesus?”

She scrunched her forehead again. The smile disappeared from her face. I’d created a kind of intolerable dissonance in her. Finally, with a tone of desperation, she landed on this: “Well, I know Jesus is nice, so what he did must have been nice.” I nodded politely and thanked her for thinking through her response.

Soon after, I launched a Group Magazine project—we hired video crews in five major metropolitan areas to stop teenagers randomly on the street and ask them a simple question: “How would you describe Jesus?” When I got all the raw footage back, I quickly discovered my experience with the junior high girl wasn’t an aberration.

Without fail, teenagers' first and favorite descriptive word for Jesus was always *nice*.³

And this reality was profoundly sad for me. Sure, Jesus was “nice” to the people he healed or fed or rescued. But he would never be voted Mr. Congeniality. He definitely wasn’t nice when he was blasting (over and over) religious leaders or calling his lead disciple “Satan” or a persistent Canaanite woman a “dog” or telling the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and follow him if that ruler wanted to “inherit eternal life.” In Matthew 23, in The Message paraphrase, Jesus told the Pharisees they were “hopeless”—not once, but *seven times* in a row—and then he planted three exclamation marks at the end of that diatribe, calling them “manicured grave plots,” “total frauds,” and “snakes.”

The point is that a *merely* nice Jesus is no Jesus at all. And if Jesus isn’t really Jesus to you, your connection to the church will devolve into a fragile cultural commitment, not a real relationship with a real person. My pastor, Tom Melton, once told me: “We don’t really believe Jesus is beautiful; otherwise, we wouldn’t describe our relationship with him as so much work.” We “work at” our relationship with Jesus, and urge our teenagers to do the same, because the nicey-nice Jesus we’ve settled for *requires us to work* if we want to maintain a connection to him, or worship him, or serve him. The false Jesus of our conventional narratives arouses no passion in students.

Their passivity toward him is a natural result of the milquetoast descriptions they've heard of him.

Nicey-nice Jesus isn't strong and fierce and *big* enough to walk with students (or us) into the fiery furnaces of everyday life. Teenagers are facing big challenges and struggles, and they're looking for someone or something to help them through or give them the courage they need to survive the blows they've endured. Because the only Jesus young people have experienced in the church is a Mr. Rogers knockoff, they've naturally turned to "lesser gods" that promise better results, including:

- humanism
- social justice
- drugs and alcohol
- affluence
- video games
- social networking
- sexual experimentation
- spirituality
- sports
- academic achievement

Today's teenagers just aren't getting who Jesus really is, or they aren't getting *enough* of who he really is, or they're getting, literally, a fake Jesus. As a result, few of them are living passionately with Christ in their everyday lives. According to Dr. Christian Smith's research for the National Study of Youth and Religion (youthandreligion.org), 9 out of 10 American young people (and their parents) don't have what social researchers call a "devoted" faith. That means:

- their faith in Christ isn't central to their life;
- they don't know the basics of their faith (our own research finds that 4 out of 10 of Christian teenagers say "a good person can earn eternal salvation through good deeds," and almost a quarter of them say Jesus "committed sins while he lived on earth"); and
- they don't see Jesus making an impact in their everyday life—he's merely a church thing.⁴

THE ONSET OF APATHY

Without the passion of a "devoted faith" in Jesus, all that's left is a cultural commitment to churchgoing. And we all know *that* cultural norm is quickly evaporating.

An “off the radar” church that is overshadowed by a growing secularization in our culture means that an “all-in” relationship with Jesus is far down the list of teenagers’ priorities. Instead, the National Study of Youth and Religion found that kids essentially see God as a “divine butler” or a “cosmic therapist.” Jesus’ job is to be all-in with their needs and their problems, while making no demands on their time, their talents, or their passions. He exists to help them do what they want, to make them happy, and to solve their problems.

The hard truth is that this entrenched attitude is the natural byproduct of the church environment teenagers have been exposed to. Our research pegs the number of kids who say they’ve learned “Jesus is God” at church at an overwhelming 87 percent.⁵ But that’s a semantic panacea. The truth is that too few of them are getting a healthy exposure to the barefaced Jesus of the Bible, and too many of them have heard what *we think* about Jesus. But they’re not experiencing his raw presence for themselves. According to the NSYR, most American young people believe that:

- God exists, and this being created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- This God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other—as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
- God doesn't need to be particularly involved in your life, except when you need him to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.
- Church is just another thing on a to-do list; it isn't a context where they enjoy their closest friendships.

This list of functional beliefs offers no evidence that young people have a ruined-for-Jesus perspective on life. For almost all teenagers, Jesus isn't the hub of their life. They have no firm idea of who Jesus really is, why he came, what he actually said, what he actually did, or what he's doing now. And when something happens in their "real" world, they struggle to understand how Jesus is a part of it.

Many likely reasons exist for this crisis of discipleship in the church, but they aren't THE REASON. This is it:

Life is draining out of the Western church—and most youth ministries—because we're not setting the kind of growth environment that is conducive for disciples.

THE JESUS-CENTERED KIT for Every Youth Ministry!



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By Rick Lawrence

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Moving From Jesus-Plus to Jesus-Only
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If you're a volunteer in youth ministry, you've likely wondered: "How did I get here?" No matter how you'd normally answer, one thing's for sure: You're "here" because Jesus nudged or maybe even dragged you here. That's because Jesus loves you and loves teenagers, and he wants them to get what you have to give. But how do you maximize your time with them? And how can you make an impact that draws students into a closer orbit around Jesus?

When you're captured by the "real" Jesus, not the "knockoff" Jesus we often hear about in our culture, then your pursuit of him influences your kids' pursuit of him. And when you're all-in with the real Jesus, you have lasting impact in your interactions with students.

This guide for volunteers is a condensed version of Rick Lawrence's wildly successful book ***Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry***. It delivers a laser-sharp focus on why we need a renewed focus on Jesus in youth ministry, and gives you practical, sustainable ways to put JCYM ideas into practice. You'll encounter page after page of field-tested ideas for crafting and nurturing a Jesus-magnetic ministry environment.

Help satisfy your teenagers' hunger for Jesus by helping to shift the orbit of your ministry.



RICK LAWRENCE has been editor of Group Magazine since 1988, and serves as the "Youth Ministry Champion" at Group/Simply Youth Ministry. He's the author, co-author, or editor of 34 books, including the small-group curriculum *In Pursuit of Jesus* and the books *99 Thoughts on Jesus-Centered Living*, *Shrewd: Daring to Obey the Startling Command of Jesus*, *Sifted: God's Scandalous Response to Satan's Outrageous Demand*, and *Skin in the Game*.



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