



# LEADING THROUGH LISTENING

by | Tim Neufeld

**Discerning How God's  
Spirit Is Moving among  
Your Students Currently**

**As a youth ministry professional I have struggled most of my career with understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in church leadership.**

On one hand, I believe that I should be the voice of God and speak to people on behalf of the Spirit. On the other hand, I believe that God's Spirit is already present among people and that I should listen to them when I am leading.

### **Indwelling of the Spirit**

Some youth leaders approach ministry as if God's Spirit is already among God's people; others approach it as if it is the youth minister who brings the God's Spirit to kids.

If we believe that we bring the Spirit to a youth group, then we'll likely lead that group like a CEO—e.g., making all of the key decisions regarding activities, curriculum, programming, etc. But if we believe that God's Spirit is already present and active in a youth group, we'll learn to discern a vision for the ministry with teens, not for teens, by asking appropriate questions.

God's Spirit is among God's people—and

more specifically, among God's teenagers. When Paul says that the Spirit of God "dwells in you" (Romans 8:9), he's using the plural form of "you." Here, and in other places, Paul argues that God is creating a home, a building, a dwelling place for his Spirit—not within individuals per se, but among believers as a corporate body. More succinctly, as one of my Southern friends states, "God is in all y'all."

Theologically we certainly believe that God's Spirit inhabits God's people, but practically we operate as if only pastors and other leaders are able to hear the voice of God. When it comes to the youth ministry, this belief system creates an environment of elitism in which the youth pastor becomes the sole decision maker.

### **Master and Commander**

When I was starting out in youth ministry, I believed it was my job to bring the vision to the program and have an answer for everyone's questions. I wanted to be a "strong" leader, which meant that I listened for God's voice and then took quick and decisive action. If volunteers or students didn't like the decisions I made, they could find another youth group!

When a student on the worship team made some suggestions I didn't resonate with, it was easy to dismiss the student's ideas with a cavalier, "Thanks, but no thanks." After all, I was the one with the B.A. in ministry and a Masters of Di-

vinity. The issue was simple back then—I was the expert, and they were not.

I can't take all the blame, though. We live in an "expert" culture and unconditionally accept this model in our congregations. Youth pastors are often hired for their ability to craft visions, sell those visions, and facilitate those visions. If parents, students, or leaders stop liking those visions (or youth leaders fail to implement their visions), the same churches that so believed in those youth workers fire them and soon hire other youth workers with "new and improved" plans.

In this cyclical scheme we simply view youth pastors as the "master and commander" who leads us to strategies of success and growth.

### **Objectifying Kids**

An unfortunate outcome of this model is that students tend to be treated as a means to an end. As a youth pastor I've built programs and selected components with the end goal of growing the youth group. My priority often has been on size of group and attracting new teens to it.

There is a real danger here, of course—if the success of an event is measured in terms of numbers, then we risk turning students into objects. In a frantic search for the latest-and-greatest growth-producing methodology, we lose sight of teens as human beings. The pattern is well-known: Attend a seminar, find a method that worked in another church, bring that method back to your home church, and rubber-stamp it upon all who attend.

But I'd quickly lose touch with my students and their culture if I believed that my job was to tell young people what they should do, and that their jobs are to passively listen. Clearly, the kids in our youth groups aren't objects; they're real people with great potential to lead and shape the vision of the ministry.

### **Discernment Takes Listening**

God's Spirit does indeed dwell in the corporate body of God's people, then we should work harder at discerning what the Spirit is up to in our congregations and youth groups. Kids have much to tell us about what God is doing in their

lives, but they often lack the ability to articulate how God is working—and mostly because they aren't asked!

Asking good questions is more important than determining which curriculum, games, and activities we should use. Leadership should be about discernment, not strategic planning.

More specifically, I've learned that discerning what God is up to in my youth ministry comes primarily through listening, not strategic decision-making. Adolescents want to participate. Faith becomes real as it's lived out on a day-to-day basis. Teens value experience, and they want to be part of the visioning and decision-making process within a youth group. Therefore our job as leaders is to listen, discern, and call out the Spirit of God among God's people.

Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out" (NIV). The metaphor here is that of a well. Imagine a bucket on a long rope lowered into the darkest depths and then pulled back up filled with fresh, life-giving water. I often picture my students as deep pools filled with rich stories, authentic life experiences, and powerful hopes and dreams for the future.

As I listen to what they are saying about their lives, I realize that God is clearly at work in them; my job is to call attention to what I see God's doing in their lives. To make God's activity clearer. To help them see it. We accomplish that through listening.

The idea of listening for God's Spirit has deeply impacted the way I understand youth ministry.

### **A Practical Example**

After coming home from a Mexico mission trip, I asked our students, "What's next? What do you think God is calling us to do now that we're home?"

We listened, and soon had several ideas on the table: Start a neighborhood sports club in our gym. Tutor at the local elementary school. Start a kid's club at the apartment complex across the street.

I let students listen to each other. They talked and prayed and decided that a kid's club in the neighboring apartment complex was the best option. I guided, but they imagined, designed, and implemented this weekly program.

Every Monday afternoon the students boldly walked across the street onto foreign turf and began building relationships with children and presenting the gospel. I did not tell them they needed to start a kid's club—rather my job was to listen to what God was doing in their hearts, help them identify that vision, and then equip them to act.

And it all started with a few questions. What else can God do if we will put aside our own agendas and listen for God's guidance?

### **A Truly Different Approach**

Asking questions, listening for God's voice and then allowing students to lead

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forward from that might be a different strategy for many of us. We're often comfortable with students leading, but typically only under our direction. We're comfortable asking questions, but not leadership surrendering ones. Our questions are often like these: What do you want to do this year? What topics do you want to study? Where do you want to go for the retreat? What can we do to attract your non-Christian friends?

While these kinds of questions might help us consider the needs of students, they lack depth. They only generate surface-level responses and focus on activities rather than on the work of God both in individual lives and in the group as a whole. And, those questions continue to keep the youth worker at the top of the heap, still in charge of the group instead of surrendering the leadership of the group over to God.

Our goal must be to shift from such closed-ended questions to open-ended ones that stimulate conversations and move our students forward into the work of God.

So, if we are interested in discerning what God's up to in the youth group, what are some good questions to ask? Here are three to start with:

### **What is God already doing in this group, and how can we join God at a deeper level?**

I like this question. It can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" response. It calls for thoughtful reflection and challenges students and leaders alike to think theologically. Students who sit passively in Bible studies, who stand at the edges of our ministries, and who love typical Sunday school answers will find this a very difficult question. This kind of question requires thinking and often leads students into moments of prayer and reflection. Responses may come slowly.

### **When is a time that you saw God work in our group, and when were you most excited about what was happening?**

This question drives students to consider the past. It helps them connect with what happened one year to four years ago. Answering this question helps them remember how God has challenged and shaped both their own lives and the life of the larger

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group. If your students can develop the ability to reflect on the past, they can learn to discern and listen for God's presence. Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." We might add to that, "The unexamined youth group is not worth attending."

### **After listening to each other and to God's Spirit, what would you love to see God do in and through our youth group?**

This question focuses on the future. It also assumes an atmosphere of hope and optimism, and it demonstrates a reliance on the working of God in

our students. The problem with traditional strategic planning is that it focuses almost exclusively on problems and shortcomings—and the role of the leader is that of problem-solver. When we ask young people this question, we invite them to dream about the future together with us, and we don't limit them to tasks and activities. Asking a question like this might be particularly helpful after a significant experi-



ence such as a mission trip when kids are more open to consider the larger values and practices of the group.

### Warnings

The process of discerning and planning with a youth group is exciting and life giving, but it does come with a few warnings.

#### First, this process cannot be rushed.

It requires patience. The questions we've raised shouldn't be offered via handouts in a Sunday school class but rather considered in an ongoing way with groups of young people using leadership teams, small groups, ministry teams, etc.

#### Second, multiple leaders should be trained to ask these types of questions.

This brings a breadth of perspectives; what one leader hears might be different than what another leader hears. Training and empowering multiple leaders also keeps discussion groups smaller in size; try to have one leader for every five to eight students.

Youth pastors with controlling natures will be threatened by this. Everything within me resists this. I have been programmed to believe that I am the CEO in charge of decision making.

Equip your leaders to ask questions and then implore them to be good listeners. Releasing control isn't easy, but leading and planning in the context of a team takes seriously the task of corporate discernment.

**Third, we must be careful to ask questions without preconceived notions regarding how students "should" answer.** Be prepared to be surprised. God continues to show up in the most unlikely of places and in the most surprising ways. God could challenge our understanding of youth ministry leadership through teens themselves.

#### Beyond the Models

Each fall, on the first day of the Introduction to Youth Ministry class I teach, I tell students that I cannot teach them a model of youth ministry. The day of formulaic approaches to programming is done and gone. A resource that works well in one youth group might have to be modified exten-

sively—or might not work at all—in another group.

What I want these aspiring youth leaders to learn over the course of two semesters is how to think critically and theologically about the context they'll each be ministering in—and how to shape a philosophy and program of youth ministry that will be relevant to their own particular ministry contexts.

Remember: God's Spirit is among God's people. Our job as leaders is not to bring the Spirit, but to discover what God is already doing—and wants to continue doing—in our students. By asking good questions we will learn to corporately listen to and discern the Spirit's voice. Only then can we equip and empower students with the right tools and resources and lead with rather than for the teens in our ministries.

In the end, asking questions, listening for responses, and discerning what God might be up to may be more important than any predefined model of youth ministry or skillfully crafted program. If we believe God's Spirit is among God's teenagers, then it's time our ministry to them reflected that belief. 🍀



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All God's children are fearfully and wonderfully made. Unfortunately, all too many of His young sons and daughters hate what they see in the mirror.

As a youth pastor, you hold a unique position. A position of friendship, and often, trust. You may be the first to notice a student's extreme weight loss, or recognize another's preoccupation with food and dieting. Indeed, that student may come to you for help.

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