

Building for Flow! (Or, the best way to grow is to keep what you've got)

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Have you ever listened to one of those financial advisors on the radio? I love 'em. Each time I listen in I'm either reminded of something or taught something new. One of the first rules you will hear from many of them is to begin some sort of savings plan. "Keeping what you get is the first rule of prosperity" is often a mantra you will hear. I want to briefly share with you one of the key strategies for numerical growth, and for reducing this crippling dropout rate that many of us are facing in youth ministry.

Simply put, it is called "flow" and the idea is simple: the best way to grow is to keep what you've got.

After I became a Christian, I joined a thriving youth group, with upwards of eighty people attending each week. It was not long before this group became the absolute highlight of my week. My whole life revolved around our fellowship meeting on Friday night and church on Sunday. There was one significant problem, however: the age range within the group was from 12-30 years old. That's right, 12-30! We are talking pre-teen to way past university age.

In one tragic summer, the group lost three-quarters of its membership. Some had good reasons for leaving; others had simply decided to move on. The youth ministry didn't hold them. It was as if the bottle had been knocked over and most of the contents poured out.

I have thought long and hard about those people leaving. I see that while this youth group was great for a time, it had one inherent flaw – the upper age limit of the group was too open-ended. The younger members loved having the oldies around, but the older members became disenchanted and felt out of it. It was ludicrous to have a youth group where 25 year old men and women were expected to fellowship on the same terms with 12 year olds.

The group should have been split up with smaller groups designed around strategic boundaries such as junior high, senior high, or university/workers. This would have ensured that there was a more appropriate ministry group for each individual. By all means, hold combined events every now and then where everybody is invited, but the regular ministries need to be focused on hitting smaller targets. This would have ensured that many more young people stayed around instead of wandering off (some headed off to another church, while others are still just wandering around).

This group desperately lacked “flow.” Flow is where a successful younger group can lead to the development of an older group. In a perfect world, there would be a vibrant Sunday school from which children would flow into a junior high group; that could lead into a senior high group and then move on to an 18+/university group. This older group could then supply leaders to keep the whole thing going.

I realize that many of us don’t have the resources to make this happen. What most of us can do is make sure the kids in Sunday school (if we have any) move into the youth group. From there, we must work to move them into a group for university students or those who are working.

One of the sure signs of a successful youth ministry is that there is a successful transition from younger group to older group.

Creating ‘Flow’

Near the top of everyone’s list of goals is numerical growth. Leaders want to see the group become larger, many of the kids would love to see more of a crowd, and the elders of the church want to see “success.” God Himself no doubt loves to see hordes of young people gather together in Christian fellowship. There are two ways to grow. The first is indisputable – evangelism. A group will grow if it is reaching out successfully to the local area. The second way to grow is by creating “flow.”

Flow is simply creating a system where a group that is well-run will move up (or flow on) to the next age group (some prefer to use the term ‘bridging’). A church that is running an effective Sunday school or after-school kids club must develop a system to move the grade 6 kids to an older group. The church needs to have some sort of youth group up and running. Or, it needs to be prepared to start one when a group of younger kids are ready to move up.

One of the sure signs of successful youth ministry is if the group following on from the previous one is larger than its predecessor. If there is a group from the junior high group moving up each year, the senior group should be bigger than in previous years as it grows through flow and evangelism. The group that follows on from the senior high group (maybe an 18+ or university/workers group) should be bigger again. The combination of flow and reaching out through evangelism is the great double barrel of growth. The simplest and most effective rule for numerical growth is to keep what you’ve got! **DO NOT NEGLECT THIS.**

Problem areas

You might be thinking, “This sounds great, but what do we do if we only have two or three kids in grade 6? Do we start up a group just for them? Sounds a bit hard to me!” Certainly the first year could be the most difficult. If the

children's Sunday school is run properly, you should find that those kids who are committed may be open to come to an older group. A wise move would be to have the leaders move up with them to make things more exciting.

The fact is, you have to start somewhere. With prayer and good programming, don't be surprised if those two or three kids love the group and invite their friends. Furthermore, in a year's time, hopefully a new group of kids will move up and the group will grow again. After a few years, the younger kids will be busting to join the older group and move away from the "little kids."

Example

In one church where I worked, we started a senior youth group (high school grades 10-12) with just three kids. Three kids and two leaders are hardly what you'd call a crowd. After a few weeks, the number grew to about seven or eight, mainly due to a few kids who came out of the woodwork when they heard that a new group was starting. The great thing was, I knew that the junior high group, which met on Sunday mornings, had eight or so young people in grade 9. In a few months, we could move them up. This would double the group and create energy and excitement.

It got even better. Due to some great work in the junior group, there were an even larger number of grade 8 kids. We knew that if we could keep everyone, or at least keep our losses low, we would gain another ten people in a year's time. Suddenly the group, which started out with three kids, would number almost thirty in only two years.

This may be an extreme example, but it is a real one and it shows the numerical power of flow.

Making sure groups "flow well"

Flow young people from one group to another at the right time

Many groups wait until the beginning of the year to move up the kids. This can be a disaster, as you might lose momentum over summer. It is one reason why many groups start the year with a whimper rather than with a bang. Move the kids up a few months before the summer break. This gives the kids a couple of months to settle into the group before the summer break. This is one sure way to "keep what you've got" and to flow well.

Prepare the youth who are moving up

The kids who are moving up need to be informed and 'primed' about the group they are moving to. Some will find it exciting; others will be scared. Begin early. If you are planning to move them up sometime later in the year, visit the kids in the younger group sometime to say "hello" and let them get to

know you a little bit – you could even bring along some of the older kids. A month or so before the move, write a letter of introduction to those who are moving up. It would also be a good idea to visit the younger youth group/Sunday school class to give a short talk about the future move.

You could even invite them to a youth group meeting where they can see what they are moving up to. Younger people are usually scared of what they don't know. Familiarity will bring calm and a sense of excitement about moving up to be with the "older kids."

Hot Tip

We all like to start the year with a bang. We hope that every person in our youth group will be there ready to go when the new year begins. However, often it takes a few weeks to really get the youth group started. Usually we start with 60% of the kids. The next week we have a few more, the week after that a few more and so on. You can solve this problem by having a camp/weekend away in late summer. Toward the end of the summer break, you will find that many of the youth are starting to get bored. That can be the perfect time to implement a summer camp. The kids will love it, and you may just begin the year with everybody fired up and ready to go.

Prepare the group they are moving into

The older group needs to see that growth is a good thing and that it is an exciting change. Often, you will find that some of the older youth will cling to the size of the group and not want growth. They may even see growth as a threat to their comfort zone. You must encourage them to embrace the change wholeheartedly.

You must also teach the older kids to treat the younger ones with gentleness and respect, rather than with competition and sarcasm. While it is natural for there to be some rivalry, we need to make sure the group has a warm, welcoming atmosphere and the older kids do not pick on the younger ones. The goal is for the older kids to provide role models. This can be accomplished through the leaders' example and good Bible teaching.

Example

We always look forward to the special Sunday about two months before the end of the year. On the given Sunday, we move the grade 6 children up to the junior high youth group. We put on a special program, and the whole meeting buzzes as the group suddenly seems huge. It is a great introduction for the newcomers. A week or two later, the grade 9 youth move up to the senior group. On that morning, we let them organize and run the junior youth group. This is often a moving testimony to the role that the group has played in their lives. It is also a great witness to the younger members of the group as it gives them a

picture of where they will be in three years' time. In the afternoon, the grade 9 makes the great leap to the older group, where they join with the older youth who look like giants by comparison! It is always a great night, because after the younger group has entered the hall, on a given signal the place erupts with welcoming cheers and handshakes all around.

As with the younger group, the gathering suddenly seems huge, and the buzz of sudden growth lasts for several months. Moving up both groups well and truly before summer ensures that most, if not all, will endure the summer break and return for the start of the new year.

A word of warning: beware of program “shock”

If has been my observation that there is often a clash of program styles between the children's and youth groups. The children's work is on a Sunday morning, built around Christian content, and offers a warm, safe, supportive environment. However, the children soon grow up to move into a youth group geared toward reaching out to the non-churched. This program may be much rowdier than the children's program. It is certainly full of content that is worlds away from what they are used to. This program is often a shock to their system and can cause them to drop out very quickly.

The solution to this is simple: make sure your youth group is a warm, safe, supportive environment and full of solid, Christian content that is designed to help them follow Jesus!

Areas for reflection

We need to be wise, strategic and good stewards of the groups that the Lord has placed in our care. It is important that as a youth leader you constantly review the transition times and strategies for your youth ministry. Plug any gap that appears between the children's ministry and the youth ministry. Make sure you move the junior high'ers up at the right time in the right way. Work at connecting your grads with the group above or a group at their prospective university. The bottom line is simply this: if we want to grow (or even stay the same), we need to keep what we've got.

You can find more from Ken at www.effectiveyouthministry.com