

RAISING THE BAR:

**NEARLY EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT CHRISTIAN YOUTH MINISTRY**

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Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Preface	ix
Introduction	1
Raising the Bar: My Own Life	11
Section One: Raising the Bar: Who We Are	
Key Values for Youth Groups	21
Closer	23
Cherish	31
Real	41
Serving	51
Transform	61
A Note about Fun	71
Section Two: Raising the Bar: What We Do	73
Raising the Bar: As We Start	75
Vision and Strategy	77
Starting from Scratch	89
Raising the Bar: Our Organisation	99
A Healthy Team	101
The Law, Health and Safety	113
Working with Parents/Carers	125
Engaging with the Wider Church	133
Transitions	141
Publicity	149
Evaluation	159
Raising the Bar: Our Programming	167

Teaching Sessions	169
Socials	181
Outreach	191
Residentials	201
Building Disciples	213
Raising the Bar: Our Teaching Sessions	225
The Big Idea	227
Preparing a Bible Talk	237
Putting Together a Session	249
Delivery: Being at the Front	261
Preparing a Bible Study	271
Leading a Small Group	279
Icebreakers, Games and Activities	293
Prayer, Sung Worship and Response	303
Challenging Behaviour and Conflict	313
Additional Needs in the Group	323
Filling a Gap	335
Raising the Bar: Into the Future	339
Staying Fresh	341
Leaving Well: Kingdom-Building not Empire-Building	349
Conclusion	355
Appendices	361
Appendix 1: Serving	363
Appendix 2: Residentials	365
Appendix 3: Preparing a Bible study	367
References	369

Preface

In many ways, this book has been 27 years in the making. I ended up in church youth ministry, seemingly by accident, that long ago, when I was unemployed after university and was asked by a local church minister if I wanted to help with the youth group. I could not say I was too busy so I said, “Yes”. I started, knowing nothing, and here I am two churches and three full-time posts later.

Five years ago, I was offered a sabbatical from Christ Church, Winchester and used it to put this manual together. I haven’t found another published book like this one, that is a one-stop resource book to teach you ‘Nearly Everything You Need to Know about Christian Youth Ministry’. It is a collation of material built up over the years, much of it used to train youth workers, with many stories and comments gathered over time, recalled to the best of my ability. I regularly send the ideas in this book to other youth leaders who ask for help, so I think it’s very practical.

I have divided the book into two sections. Raising the Bar: Who We Are looks at values that should shape everything that we do in our groups. This section helps us to be as well as to do. Raising the Bar: What We Do is a practical guide to youth ministry. You can read it from start to finish, but you can also dip into it when you need to do a particular task or grow in a skill. I hope it’s self-explanatory: the chapter ‘Engaging with the Wider Church’ helps your youth engage with the wider church.

The book is designed to help at whatever stage you are in ministry. If you are just starting out, it will give you the basics. If you are experienced, it will stretch you, and perhaps push you in new directions. If you are a senior leader, leading other leaders, then there is guidance to help you. If you aren’t, then there are areas to aspire to.

You will find many ‘Ten top tips’ through the book. Grab hold of these if you don’t have much time. Linked with this book, there are online resources at www.churchyouthministry.com with downloadable resources to use again and again to plan Bible studies, sessions, residentials, etc. Don’t let them constrain you, but use them as a springboard.

If I have missed anything, please get in touch. We are all learning. I hope the book is helpful in your youth ministry in **Raising the Bar**.

Dave Thornton, January 2020

Real

A cosmic accident?

A study using NASA's Kepler space telescope suggests a conservative estimate of 1 billion potentially habitable earths in our galaxy (Achenbach, 2015). Scientist Paul Davies, commenting on this discovery, wrote in the New York Times: "We are a product of this cosmic accident" (Davies, 2013). Messages bombard young people like cosmic dust, whispering: "You are nothing special. You are a matter of random chance." In a world now seemingly devoid of a loving Creator, young people may feel the need to struggle to make themselves appear special. To do so, they have to acquire more, become fitter, stronger, better-looking and more popular and achieve higher grades. Positively, they may reach their full potential; worryingly, we often see more negative effects.

Lack of self-esteem

In today's world, if we are not inherently beautiful, we need to make ourselves beautiful but when are we beautiful enough? In a TV interview, Gary Barlow, member of boy band Take That, said he did not go out of his house for months after harsh treatment in the press. He said: "How do I just change everything?" (Jefferies, 2014)

Christian homes should be places of safety, but I have heard fathers calling daughters, "Fatso" and, "Big bum". It's naïve to think Christian youth groups are full of people with high self-esteem. I asked a group of young people what they thought of themselves when they looked in the mirror. Both boys and girls struggled, using words including "hatred". Nine out of 10 girls were unhappy with the way they looked. Do I help? I made a disastrous mistake when I said to a teenage girl: "You look tired." She replied: "I'm not wearing make-up today."

Believe and Achieve

If we are not inherently special, perhaps achievement will make us stand out. "If only we can win 'The X-Factor'." One local secondary school has as its

motto, 'Believe and Achieve'. Inspiring but not the whole story. I know of a teenager with dyslexia who was so inspired by a great teacher that he came to believe that he could achieve and his exam results shot up. Still, I go up for a header in a game of football, believing the ball will soar past the flailing keeper into the back of the net, and generally miss completely. But saying: "Have God-given skills, personality and gifts, get good teaching, work hard, eat well, sleep well, have confidence in who God has made you and the teaching you have had, and get a lucky break in the exam questions and achieve" isn't quite as catchy!

One January, I asked a group of 11 to 14-year-olds their greatest fear for the year to come: over half were concerned that they might fail educationally.

A survey of 28 14 to 18-year-olds I completed found that all of them experienced being overwhelmed by stress/busyness at some time. Over three quarters experienced this at least one day a week. Nearly 40 per cent felt overwhelmed most days.

A survey of 28 14 to 18-year-olds I completed found that all of them experienced being overwhelmed by stress/busyness at some time. Over three quarters experienced this at least one day a week. Nearly 40 per cent felt overwhelmed most days. A mum said many parents were colluding with this, encouraging children to do activities to look good

on personal statements/resumés, even if it meant their teenagers weren't enjoying them.

I don't want to crush dreams. Yes, young people can play for their country and bring an end to modern-day slavery. But often we will fail, however hard we work, and however much we believe. Success and achievement are not what makes us special. Failure is not something that makes us ordinary or worse.

Satisfying others' expectations

If we are not special on our own, maybe we can find contentment being like our friends. By the time young people reach the age of 11 in the UK, they will certainly have a clear sense of what they should have. Not only a computer console but the right console with the right games. Not only a mobile phone

but the latest smartphone with the fastest download times. Birthday parties at home give way to parties at expensive attractions or proms. Drinking alcohol, taking drugs or rebelling against authority may follow because fitting in is so important.

Problems with self-esteem. Not expecting nor knowing how to deal with failure. Trying to please others. All of these can lead to discontentment and dissatisfaction. But is there a better story which Christian youth ministry could be telling?

A grace-transformed identity

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.' So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1.26-27

Genesis 1 reveals the truth that mankind is graciously created in the image of God and God sees people as “very good”. Yes, we have rebelled since Creation, but Jesus loves and accepts people. No matter who they are. No matter where they’ve been. No matter what they’ve done. Jesus had massive amounts of compassion for people who were on the edges of society and over the edge. Look at the tax collectors (Mark 2), or the woman caught in adultery (John 8), or the woman at the well (John 4), or the prostitute washing Jesus’ feet.

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner.'

Luke 7.36-39

Jesus did know this woman. He knew exactly who she was. What did he say to her? “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7.48).

Jesus goes on to show the ultimate acceptance: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5.8).

Young people don't have to strive to be special. They don't have to pretend to be cool or strive to be better and achieve more to be accepted. Jesus accepts them for who they are. They can be confident in who they are in Christ and who he has made them to be. They don't have to prove anything. If young people understand the love of God — he's already made them special and accepts them for who they are — and the love of his community, they can be real about hopes and dreams, fears and failures. They can be real about their personalities. Our youth ministries can tell a better story than the world is telling, by allowing people to be real. St. John's Church, Harborne, Birmingham, UK has the idea. When I spoke to them, their 14 to 18-year-olds' group was called simply, 'Authentic'.

Real about sin, shame, mistakes and failure

The Bible says we have all sinned. Our youth groups should be places where young people can be real about their mistakes, sins and failures. I wonder if they are. One mature Christian in our group said recently that she finds it easier to be honest with friends who aren't Christians than those who are.

We asked our teenage boys to fill in a questionnaire, talking about various areas they might be struggling with, from being over-competitive in sports to alcohol. One particular challenge many faced was pornography. They were incredibly honest which allowed us to talk to all of them about the issue. Something that changed is that some of the young men started accountability groups. They had been real and were now able to support each other.

A little while ago I met a teenage girl who was pregnant. I said she could come to the youth group; she'd be welcome. She said she was worried she would be judged, and I find that sad.

I've always wanted to have a crèche at the youth group.

I said to the teenager that I have always wanted to have a crèche at the youth group. I have, because I think that is what

being real looks like. The reality is that some teenagers get pregnant and some have abortions. Are our youth groups places that a pregnant teenager would be welcome? Or a teenager who has had an abortion? Or perhaps more challenging, a teenager who is thinking of having an abortion?

Real about our personality

One of the joys at our younger youth group (11 to 14-year-olds) is when I see young people playing hide and seek behind the curtains and in the cupboards. Why is that great? Because they are being real. People don't have to pretend to be cool if they don't want to be cool. Nor do they have to pretend to be uncool when they're seriously cool!

We have done dance lessons with the older teenage group a few times, normally partner dancing to contemporary music. One of the lads said in his feedback afterwards: "I thought I would hate it, but I didn't." But there have been a couple of people through the years who would never do it, not because they were worried they would not be able to do it, nor because they thought they were too cool for it, but just because that wasn't who God had made them to be. They would rather sit and read or draw than take part. That's their personality, and that's OK. They too can be real here.

All are welcome to come and be themselves. You don't have to like football. You don't have to bad mouth your teachers. You don't have to gossip. You don't have to get drunk. You can listen to choral music. You don't have to have had sex. You don't have to take drugs. You don't have to have a smartphone. Isn't that a better story to tell?

Real about our hurts

On another residential time away, one girl shared in her dorm something bad that had happened to her. When I heard about it, to be honest, I was a bit annoyed.

Two of the leaders were already supporting her, and I was frustrated the girl had felt she needed to tell her friends. Overnight I felt God speaking to me very clearly, saying that I might talk about being real, but when people were real, I didn't like it. I was convicted. So, before breakfast, the girl who had spoken, her friends, the two female leaders and myself met. We put a large rock – almost too heavy to carry – in the centre of the room. I asked the girl to pick up the rock, and with difficulty she did. I said she had been carrying this rock for a long time, now she had trusted us enough to tell us about it, and to ask for our help. Quickly, her friends gathered around her and put a hand under the rock to help carry it. We carried the rock together to the foot of the cross, laid it there and we prayed. It was a holy moment where reality broke out, and I hope that by the grace of God, there was some healing as we stood together with her. Are our groups places where we can have that reality?

Real about our strengths

I will write more about this in the next chapter. If God has created us as we are, we don't need to be embarrassed or falsely modest about the gifts and abilities he has given us. When someone encourages us, we can simply say: "Thank you." We don't need to hide our lamps under bushels, because we know everyone in the room has a lamp. OK, so we may not get straight A*s, but we may be able to design an incredible website or be the most welcoming person in the room. We can be real about our strengths.

Encouraging reality

Start with cherishing

Being real is hard and like cherishing, it takes time. We are fighting our own vulnerabilities: "Do I trust you enough to be real with you?" As we grow in our cherishing, I believe we also grow in being real with one another: "I know you better. I know you love me without any strings attached. Now that I know that, I'm going to risk being real."

Start gently

A regular icebreaker in our group is a game of bingo with squares saying: “Has a brother”, “Has watched all of The Lord of the Rings movies”, etc. Young people find someone who can sign the box to say it applies to them. The first person to fill all the boxes wins. It’s not deep, but it allows young people to say: “You’ve got a brother? I didn’t know that.” It facilitates people being real.

When I visited Aldridge Parish Church youth group in the UK, they had a 60-second introduction to a group member which they did each time they met, including their favourite Bible verse. People are real but can prepare it in advance.

People might meet together one-to-one in the group and ask each other questions, sharing something of themselves, from what toothpaste they use to their most embarrassing moment.

Encourage reality, while disguising individuals

We sometimes give people cards and ask them to write on the card how they are feeling, or what is on their mind, explaining no-one will know they have written it. When they have done that, we ask people to pass the cards around randomly and then have people read the one that they end up with. People can be heard and prayed for, without everyone knowing who said what. This often gets people away from the belief that: “Everyone else is fine and I’m the odd one out.”

Set the example

I was astonished at an event for youth leaders when a well-respected speaker said: “I struggle with pornography.” How much easier I think it became that night for one leader to turn to another and say: “I struggle with porn too.” When I co-led a new small group, one of the teenagers said afterwards she was surprised and encouraged that I struggled with sin. We need to be putting ourselves into positions where people can hear us say: “I struggle too”, while still being wise about what we share. The general rule I give to leaders is that if they would not be happy sharing it with the teenagers’ parents, they should not share it.

Give space for testimony

If someone shares a testimony of God's work in their life with us, we should encourage them to share it with the whole group, perhaps with us interviewing them. They can prepare it in advance to take some pressure off them.

Sometimes we say: "If you'd like to say something about what God has been doing in your life, come to the front." This might be easier in a small group, and we may want to create some ground rules before we start, so we will often say that what is said needs to stay in the room. Sometimes no-one will stand up (but even then, I will leave it until people are getting uncomfortable because it is scary for people to come up and my natural tendency is to panic and move on). Sometimes many tell their stories.

One testimony recently was the next chapter in something that started months previously. One young man spoke to me about what God was doing in his life. I was so encouraged but he didn't want to share it with the group as he was too shy. Each time we had testimonies I would look out of the corner of my eye at him: could this be the time? Eventually, I stopped looking. Six months later, as one person sat down, he stood up. I did a double-take. He spoke clearly and eloquently of the work of God in his life, of how he now felt loved and accepted and of how God had broken through his shyness to allow him to speak about it now.

Testimonies might include what God did while someone played sport that weekend, God answering when another young person cried out to him for a friend and a third being healed from an eating disorder. Encourage testimonies of God's work in small ways as well as large ones.

One of my most horrifying moments in youth ministry was when a newer leader said: "I'm going to put down the microphone and if you want to repent of anything, then you can do it." Alarm bells started ringing. Did we have the capacity to deal with what might come up? After a pause, one after another came, repenting of different things. It was a wonderful moment of reality.

Honour reality

One of the first memories I have of a youth group being real happened by accident as I spoke on the Fruit of the Spirit (from Galatians 5). As I reached 'peace', I asked the question: "How many of us regularly argue with our parents?" and two people put their hands up, realised it had been asked rhetorically and put their hands down. I thanked them for their honesty and people prayed for them. When I asked the question again, nearly all the group put their hands up. Greater openness broke out as we moved through the other characteristics.

Final thoughts

Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life," yet the world often pushes young people towards untruths and unreality. One young person I know has 2000 Instagram followers. As an adult I feel the pressure too – my Facebook page has no hint as to music or films I like. What if I'm thought of as uncool? If I, as an adult, feel that weight, how much more the young people I serve? How attractive then would a place be where young people could be real? Where masks could be left at the door as people come in, and maybe, just maybe, left behind when people leave?

Think it through

- What evidence do we see in our youth groups that we are telling a better story in terms of being real?
- What could be the next step to tell a better story in our context?

Delivery: Being at the Front

A young person approached the speaker: “You said ‘OK’ 31 times during that talk.” Sadly, the speaker was me. How do we get our prepared Bible message across? That’s about our delivery. Sometimes our delivery hinders the effectiveness of our message.

Three key beliefs before we start:

1. **Jesus matters.** If we don’t think he matters, the young people won’t think he matters. While others were walking away from Jesus, Simon Peter said to him: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6.68). Having the same single-minded devotion to Jesus and his mission will make our delivery powerful.
2. **Every young person matters:** that really distracting person on social media during our talk and that annoying girl who argues with everything we say in our small group. They are created in the image of God. Not only the people in the room, but those on the register who don’t come, and those who have never set foot in our group; they are people for whom Jesus died.

Take a good look at people when you get up to speak. There may be some who are not saved. There may be some who are feeling ashamed. There may be some who are arrogantly thinking they don’t need Jesus. Don’t bash them, love them like Jesus does. How should we speak the toughest challenges of Scripture?

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.

1 Peter 3.15

3. God is with us by his Spirit to grow fruit.

*So is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Isaiah 55.11

We humbly present the Word. The Spirit does God's work. Fruit grows on the tree. Young people get saved. Young people grow to maturity.

Ten top tips for delivery

1. **Lead in godliness.** People will remember your attitude and your heart more than what you say. Does your life show that God's Word is true – that he can transform sinners into beautiful people as he did with Zacchaeus in Luke 19? As Paul wrote in Romans 12.3: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement."

One leader asked chatting young people to be quiet, he may have even asked them twice, then he exploded deafeningly,

Shut up!!!!

And everyone did instantly. Some young people seemed to have had their upper bodies pressed backwards by the force of the outburst. A few people were looking at me out of the corner of their eyes. A line had been crossed. The leader had momentarily been scarily out of control. I stood up, put my hand on the leader's shoulder and we prayed for him. Then he continued. The leader knew he'd been out of line and later apologised. None of us is perfect and it won't be long before our own sin shows, but still we are called to lead in godliness, love, gentleness and humility.

2. **Practise out loud ahead of time (even announcements).** I try to practise a talk at least four times before I deliver a talk. Why?
 - It gets sharper as confusing parts get clarified or cut and bits that are boring get reworked.
 - I know how long it will really take.
 - Delivery is more engaging. It's more familiar so I can look up while I speak.

3. **Be yourself.** Don't try to be the same as someone else you've seen lead or speak. God made you YOU for a reason. You will reach people I won't. Be real. Be vulnerable. We need to be honest about our own sinfulness even though it's not right to share all our struggles. Of course, if being yourself is screaming at people to repent at the top of your voice, it might be best to model yourself more on someone else. Start with Jesus.

4. **Be fast-moving when it is right to be** (not when you want young people to respond thoughtfully). I remember the first time I watched the movie "Speed" with Keanu Reeves playing Jack Traven (Speed, 1994). The movie is about Jack's attempts to disarm a bomb on a speeding bus and save the passengers. As the credits rolled, I realised I had been sitting on the edge of my seat for the last hour. Why? It was fast-moving. It was exciting. I had not been turning around, talking to my friends. I had not gone to the toilet.

There's no point the speaker working hard to keep their talk under 10 minutes if you start off the session with a meandering 15-minute notice about the weekend away in a month's time. White flags will be up long before the speaker stands up. What helps you to be fast-moving?

 - a. Everyone involved being clear which parts of the programme they are leading. It's easy to blame the young people for talking when you've lost their attention carelessly as the gears shift between different parts of the programme. So, say your final words and someone else should jump up to take over.

- b. Grabbing people fast. Whether you're leading a game or doing a talk, you need to move to the front fast and start fast. Don't start with:
 - i. What you did last week. It does not encourage people to listen today.
 - ii. An apology: "Sorry I didn't have as long as I would have liked to prepare this." If it's a talk, it's God's Word so just start.

One of the biggest challenges if you have sung worship, is the handover to the worship leader. If you're on your own with a group of four young people, you may hand out song sheets, play the song on the streaming website or CD, set the volume – hard enough! If you've got a band, young people need to get into position which, with cables, guitars, guitar straps, pedals, drumsticks and music stands, isn't an easy prospect. Then the lead guitarist finds their guitar needs to be retuned and the song they're starting with isn't at the top of the pile on their stand, people shift awkwardly and start talking. Then the worship leader has to ask people to be quiet. Of course they're talking. They've been standing up waiting for the last five minutes! Fast-moving means signalling the band five minutes before they're likely to start. Your finishing off covers their squeezing past the keyboard. You finish and they take off. Twang! Fast-moving.

- c. Keeping moving once you've grabbed people. I wonder if you speak like this: "And Jesus talked about this when he said:" [Look down at the Bible. Thumb through. Search. Thumb again. Search again. Look up. Smile awkwardly.] "I can't find it now but Jesus said something like, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'"

If you need to find a Bible verse, put a bookmark in beforehand – whatever it takes to keep things moving.

- d. Having everything you need for the session at hand before you start – Bibles, pens, paper, etc.

5. Help people to listen.

- a. Stand with confidence. Think of a comedian playing live in a big theatre. They are small and all they're doing to hold people's attention is talking! Yet they normally command the stage. That does not mean they keep still. They walk sometimes, but they walk purposefully. They don't meander around continually because that distracts their audience from what they are saying.

The general rule of thumb is – stand with feet shoulder-width apart. I call it 'planting your feet'. That does not mean you need to plant them for long enough to take root, but to put them down, talk, move on and plant them again, talk some more. If you stand with your feet crossed, swaying gently from side to side because you're feeling nervous, some young people are more likely to be running a sweepstake on how long it will be before you fall over than to be listening to your talk. The only way to get over this is to practise.

That doesn't mean you can't be nervous. I know one speaker who had been doing Bible talks for nine years and who still needed to hold onto the lectern to stop his hands shaking. He was definitely planted though!

- b. Look at the audience. This is not the same as looking over the heads of the audience. Make eye contact with individuals. Why wouldn't you? After all, you are talking to them, aren't you?

If you are speaking with a presentation on screen, don't speak to the screen, speak to the people about what they can

see on the screen. If you practise, you will work out how to do this. Do you need to print out your slides, or have your laptop in front of you?

- c. Try not to distract from God working. Think about whether what you're wearing or your language is suitable for the setting or whether it will be distracting. If you're not sure, ask someone. One young female leader led a Bible study wearing a very low-cut top, with her notes rested on the floor so she had to keep bending over to look at them. The boys in our group made no eye contact with her, instead gazing wildly into space.
- d. Use your voice. Speak clearly. Use tone and pitch well. Louder and quieter (but your 'quieter' still needs to be able to be heard by everyone in the room). Sharper and flatter. Use silence. Think about recounting the story of Legion in Mark 5.7:

He shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!'

There is a clear signal in the text how you should be speaking it out. Don't just go on in a monotone.

One might think that noisy teenagers are best served by speaking loudly and some of us could deaden the sound of noisy teenagers fairly effectively, but the converse is true. Good teachers will drop their voices when people are talking to force people to listen. Some will leave awkwardly-long, dramatic pauses to make people look up and see what is happening at the front. If I'm preparing a talk, I'll even write '[pause]' in my notes if I want to remember to give people a breather to allow them time to think.

6. **Work out where to put notes (if needed) ahead of time.** You cannot hold your notes and your Bible and turn the pages. If you can do a great talk or lead a great session without any notes, fine. If not, a lectern or music stand works well, but make sure it is at the right height before starting. High enough to be easy for you to read your notes without bending down. Low enough that the front row of teens isn't obscured.

7. **If you have the privilege to work as a team (and that includes having one other leader with you) then work as a team.** If you've just realised you'll need Bibles in a few minutes, ask someone else to get them. Even something as simple as that sends the message: "I'm not a one-man/woman band – it is a blessing to have you alongside me."

If you're supporting someone else who is leading, see the big picture. Take an emotional step back and look around: Who is engaged? Who is being challenged? Who is getting emotional? Whose mind is elsewhere? Who needs help? Is the session hitting the mark? If it's not, is there anything you or another leader can do to help? Can you share a testimony of your own experience which will help focus people? Can you pray for someone? Can you shift your position to help focus a group? Can you smile and nod at the speaker? Can you draw the speaker's attention to the clock if they haven't realised they've gone over time?

8. **Watch the time.** If you have planned well, you should know when you should be starting each section. If you're falling behind, what do you need to cut to finish on time? If you're ahead, what can you expand on? Do you want to add something in like a response song or prayer time?

Young people tend not to be quite as polite as adults. Adult church members will often look interested even though they've inwardly fallen asleep. When young people start shifting their positions or glancing towards the clock or their watches, you really need to be finishing what you're doing or helping people refocus by asking a question, or inviting them to discuss something with their neighbour, or putting in a personal illustration, or something else. But don't just press on, it will only get worse.

9. **Use language that is open to all.** Perhaps your group consists of three people and you know they're all Christians, so you use church language which they all understand. Fine, but would they bring their friends? Probably not. You should use language that people can all understand and explain what you need to, even: "We're going to wait on God now."

One of our leaders did a brilliant explanation for a couple of minutes about why we sang worship songs. Suddenly, everyone was on the same level, everyone understood what we were doing and why, and the singing improved.

I was in a youth group recently where people kept falling over while being prayed for. The youth leader took the microphone and explained to people what was going on, and whether it happened to everyone, and what people should think if it wasn't happening to them and whether it was a vital part of being a Christian. Brilliant!

10. **Be prayerfully flexible.** If you've read 'Putting together a session' with its thoughts on timing, then read the above on keeping to time, you might think that you get to the session and follow it through like a slave. But if God is a living God, and your relationship with him conversational, he should be able to call an audible. An audible in American Football is when the quarterback on the offensive team looks at the defence, realises they're planning something and changes the play he told the rest of the team he was going to be using. You certainly see God calling an audible in Acts 8.26-30:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

*Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading
Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?"
Philip asked.*

You need to be ready as godly leaders to listen and obey just as Philip did. Yes, God could have told you to change the plan earlier in the week, but you cannot force him to do that – he is God! This is harder if you're working in a team. Imagine the band have arrived early to prepare 5 songs, the session speaker spends longer talking, so they only get to do 2 songs – annoying to have wasted an hour of practice. For this reason, this should be an exception rather than a common occurrence. If you have young people involved, it's good practice not to cut their ministry, and if you need to cut anyone's, try to cut your own.

When disaster strikes

At times, it's right and indeed essential to change everything. One is a time of world disaster, like the Twin Towers falling in New York, or the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004, when it's right that we change the programme. It would seem odd that the next Sunday we would start by saying, "Last week we talked about Exodus chapter 3, this week we are going to move on to Exodus chapter 4." Something has changed in the world and we need to respond to that.

The second is a personal disaster — a disaster closer to home. If someone in the group has died, it would seem odd to speak about Gideon. Even when, say, a parent of one of the group has died, I would certainly want to say something, although I would let the young person know before I did that. They might then decide they do not want to be there. The alternative is having the situation where many know there's an elephant in the room, and we run the risk of appearing out of touch and uncaring. If we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we want to be supporting each other with love and prayer at the most devastating times. We cannot simply ignore the pain that is going on in the lives of those around us.

What would I do at such times? Preach Jesus. I would not want to preach that I have all the answers, but that Jesus is the answer. I would gently point to Jesus 'God with us' and our future hope:

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21.3-4

I would also call people to repentance and faith. Shocking times shake us up and we look for certainty. This is a great time to gently and without manipulation call

When a girl in our youth group died, I preached like I have never preached before.

people to Jesus. The world often inoculates us, telling us that everything is OK and humanity is in control. Failure and suffering tell us that this is a lie, and we need a friend who is eternal, a saviour and a living hope.

When a girl in our youth group died, I preached like I have never preached before at both our youth groups. Suddenly, life and death were brought sharply into focus. I gently but without apology preached Jesus, and two people made commitments to Jesus for the first time that weekend.

Final thoughts

We might forget stuff, run out of time, not feel we have done very well or make mistakes — like calling a young person “darling” by accident (or maybe that was just me) — but God is the one who is at work so from the front we may not know what has happened. I once got near the end of a session and I seemed to lose everyone’s attention, heads went down, people looked away and I thought I had blown it. I sped up to get to the end as fast as I could. Experienced leaders gave me feedback afterwards. I had not lost people’s attention. Instead, they had been so challenged as God spoke through me that they could not look at me anymore. God is somehow growing fruit in people as we, in our often-bumbling ways, faithfully present his Word to people.

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