

Youth ministry matures during Johnson's tenure_22105

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By George Henson

Staff Writer

RICHARDSON-Randy Johnson insists the key to longevity in youth ministry is developing solid relationships with both youth and adults. He should know, after serving in youth ministry 30 years and recently celebrating his 20th anniversary as minister of youth education at First Baptist Church in Richardson.

Johnson first learned the importance of developing a ministry tuned as much to parents and youth workers as at a youth during a conference led by youth ministry pioneer Bob Taylor.

"That was the first time I had heard anyone talk about the importance of working with parents and youth workers and also of using the existing organizations like Sunday school," he said.

Randy
Johnson
once
considered
himself a
"pastor in
waiting."
But he's
committed
30 years
of his life
to youth
ministry.
(Photo by
George
Henson)

"Back then, the mindset was: 'We've hired you as the youth minister. You do the youth ministry.' I don't think we really had the credibility we do today. We were really seen largely as activity directors."

At that time, a year into his ministry at Monterey Baptist Church in Lubbock, Johnson honestly saw himself as a pastor in waiting.

"Youth ministry wasn't that much of an interest to me, but nobody was looking for a single pastor," he said. "When I met with the search committee, I told them, 'I'm not going to do this youth ministry thing very long.' And they said, 'Fine.'"

But once he had the job, he poured himself into it.

"I ordered every book the Baptist Sunday School Board published connected to youth ministry. I was smart enough to know I didn't know

anything, and so I got these books and read them," he said.

After five years, he moved to the youth ministry at First Baptist Church in Bryan. At about this time, he began to feel he might stick with youth ministry. However, even to this day, he said his calling is different than many youth ministers.

"God called me to ministry as a vocation. I've never said God called me to youth ministry. Yeah, I'm doing youth ministry now, but next year, who knows," he explained.

His tenure in Bryan was marked by the influence of a layman nearly 80 years old.

"I learned a lot there about discipleship from Amos Bell," Johnson said. "He led discipleship at First Baptist in Bryan. He was in his late 70s, but he led the Bible drill and speaker's tournament programs and started student-led Bible studies during the week.

"It didn't take long to notice there was an unusual spiritual maturity to those kids."

Johnson came to Richardson in 1985, but it wasn't immediately smooth sailing.

"I came to the big city, and it ate me alive," he said.

It was a time of testing, he recalled.

"This was the first time I had difficulty starting out. When I came here, they had had a pretty strong program, and I had different ideas. Basically, I bit off more than I could chew," Johnson admitted.

The church stuck with him through the rocky start, however, confirming the reason he wanted to come to Richardson in the first place.

"I came here because I knew the church's reputation as being a good place to serve—a church where staff tended to serve for a while. I had already served five years at Monterey and five years in Bryan, and that was a long time for youth ministers at that time. But I thought if I came here, I had the chance to do something in youth ministry not a lot of people get to do—stay for an extended amount of time. But I never dreamed I'd stay here 20 years," he explained.

The biggest change over those 20 years has been in the evolution of youth workers as originators of ministry, he asserted.

"Now, youth leadership plan their own fellowship and retreats. That doesn't bother me at all. I love that.

"I want those youth workers to be involved with these kids outside the classroom in ministry projects.

"When youth workers see themselves as youth ministers as much as I am, that's what excites me," Johnson said.

The youth workers at First Baptist spend hours decorating their rooms, giving each department its own special identity.

He said staying 20 years and having had relationships with parents of teenagers gives him credibility with virtually any committee in the church he needs to confer with.

"I've had most of their kids in our youth ministry. They know me; they trust me. I have credibility that if I say I need something, they know I do."

Also, many of those adults sitting on church committees are products of his youth ministry.

Youth, he said, really haven't changed much in his 30 years of ministry.

“I don't know that kids are that much different. All the technology seems to have made them brighter and more savvy about the world, but they really haven't changed. There were kids in Lubbock with drug problems 30 years ago, so that isn't a new thing.

“If anything, these kids may be more hungry for relationships. They want to be a part of a group, but they don't want to just soak it up—they want to be involved in ministry and give back,” he said.

Relationships, not big, flashy events, have been the bedrock of his ministry, he noted.

“If you look back at my ministry here, you won't see much flashy stuff,” he said.

“I tell my students they have to own their own relationship with God.

“They can't ride on the coattails of their parents or this youth ministry.

“We also stress loving on people when they come here to visit. We talk all the time about welcoming those who come here with the acceptance of God's love.

“Sure, we try to do things with excellence, but it's the relationships that keep people here.

“It's not my teaching or anyone's music. It's that love.”

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