

Voices: Pastoral care for youth ministry

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When I first came to Muleshoe, I believed I had arrived in the middle of nowhere. I quickly learned Muleshoe is more like a central hub for the surrounding area than I thought.

In a small town such as this, it is an oddity that our church ministers to four different school systems. This means our youth ministry can reach more than just the students at Muleshoe Independent School District. It also means I travel a lot during the school year.

From school to school, one graduation ceremony to the next, and sometimes attending two varsity football games in one night, every school function and community event I attend is done in the spirit of pastoral care.

Some pastors see their primary or even sole function as preaching. These pastors spend most of their week in sermon preparation, giving little to no time to pastoral care.

Defining pastoral care

What do I mean by “pastoral care?” I mean things like visiting people in the hospital and nursing homes. I also mean responding to sudden emergencies like those that awaken a pastor in the middle of the night.

For me, this kind of care—pastoral care—has been an important part of my ministry for most of my calling. I am grateful for my current place of service, where I have the pleasure of serving with a lead pastor who goes above and beyond the call of duty when it comes to hospital visits and

general care and concern for the congregation he serves.

Even though I'm a youth minister, I have visited many of our less youthful church members in their hospital rooms in the last few years. They may not be the students I serve most often in church ministry, but these visits are about church family, nonetheless.

Though youth ministry does not include many visits to the hospital to check on ailing students, I do check on students with injuries such as broken arms, surgeries such as wisdom teeth removal, or when they're just sick with the flu. Typically, such things don't require a trip to the hospital or time spent in the waiting room.

If pastoral care in youth ministry is not mostly hospital and nursing home visits, what is it?

David K. Switzer contends in *Pastoral Care Emergencies* that care for another becomes pastoral when that care is "an expression of the whole life and purpose of the Christian community" (p. 13).

Care should not be limited only to the low moments of a person's life. Pastoral care addresses the entirety of a person's life in relation to the community of faith and fellowship found in Jesus Christ.

Pastoral care does not just occur when a minister or deacon visits the sick or hurting in the hospital or at the nursing home. Though hospital visitation occurs less often in youth ministry than in other ministerial roles, youth ministers still engage all the time in pastoral care as Switzer defines it.

Pastoral care in youth ministry

If pastoral care in youth ministry is to include a holistic concern for the life of youth, this means being present in what youth find important in and for their lives.

Youth ministers should go to football, basketball, volleyball, baseball and soccer games, because our kids are there doing what they love. We should go to choir and band concerts, art shows, rodeos, stock shows and junior high theater productions.

We should attend graduation parties, birthdays, award ceremonies and potluck meals, because we care about the entirety of the lives of our students.

Pastoral care in youth ministry should not happen just when students need encouragement—such as before an important test or when an arm is broken. Pastoral care in youth ministry also means showing up to what is important for the students, so they may see how much they are loved by their church family and by Christ.

This attentiveness to pastoral care makes all the difference for our students. I realized how important that difference is during my first year of interning in ministry. As a lanky college intern in my home church, my mentor taught me all about hospital visitation. He also taught me the other side of pastoral care.

I never will forget the first time a student asked me to attend one of his school functions. While not being too thrilled with the thought of attending a junior high theater production, I still showed up because the student asked for me to be there.

With every cringey bit of dialogue and awkward pause as a student tried to remember a line, I remember thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?”

The answer arrived at the end of the play when the student who asked me to attend lit up when he saw me there. Presence and pastoral care in youth ministry changes lives.

Youth ministers, if you are wondering how you can start the journey of

pastoral care, the good news is you already have started through your presence. Continue being present with your students in both their good and bad days, whether this looks like attending a football game or walking the hallways of a hospital.

Youth ministers, your presence matters.

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