



invest

THE *last guy I ever expected to see in my youth group was Mr. Jenkins. He wasn't the type. Pushing sixty, hard of hearing, and always in a suit. Imagine my surprise when he barged into our group one night and loudly introduced us to his "buddy," a long-haired boy named Tom.*

Now the town I grew up in was a small town where people knew each other. That's why we stared at Mr. Jenkins when he showed up with Tom. We recognized Tom from school. He was one of "those kids." What's he doing here? I wondered as they found their seats. True to form, Mr. Jenkins sat ramrod-straight in a folding chair while Tom sprawled across a couch. His clothing reeked of marijuana and his shaggy hair fell all over his shoulders—and in our conservative church I wasn't sure which was worse. Tom had been hitchhiking when Mr. Jenkins picked him up, and it looked like he was still not sure where he was.

Few of us paid attention to the lesson that night—we were all watching Tom. But Mr. Jenkins was taking everything in. His wheels were turning and his lips were moving in (almost) silent prayer for Tom's salvation.

Remarkably, the two of them became friends. Mr. Jenkins gave Tom an enormous brown Bible, and Tom carried it everywhere. Over time we welcomed him into our community, and one day he came into relationship with Jesus Christ. Just like that.

That's when I learned a lesson I'll never forget: God uses ordinary people to draw youth to Himself. No ministry degrees required and no special gifting necessary. Anyone will do.

1 You are qualified

Obviously, some people are gifted. They can't cross the parking lot without a trail of kids following in their wake. But if you are not one of those, fear not. Youthwork has many entry points besides gifting. For example:

- **A burden.** God has placed certain young people on your heart. Whether it's the babysitter or the kid next door, their names clutter your prayers because of their obvious need for Christ.
- **The asset of time.** Scheduling a meal with a young person or attending a youth retreat doesn't set you back at all. You have margin to give.
- **The ability to listen.** Like us, young people long to be cared about. By making eye contact and showing an interest in what they're thinking, feeling, and doing, you demonstrate the kind of care that invites relationship.
- **A loving heart.** Love knows no opposition and melts the hardest heart. What more needs to be said?

The bottom line is this—whether you’re a parent, a paid youth-worker, or a volunteer, God can use you to shepherd students. I’ve been watching it happen for nearly three decades.

2 A two-question test

It’s not uncommon for adults to view students as a different species. They look different, act different, dress different, talk different, relate different, listen to different music . . . and appear disinterested. Join a cluster of students and watch how quickly they stop talking or fade away. No wonder so many adults feel they have nothing to offer and no place to start. Awkwardness and rejection don’t top my list of favorite experiences either. Have you ever felt this way?

It’s important to remember that appearances don’t represent reality when it comes to investing in young people. You have more to offer than you realize. Just ask yourself two questions:

Question One: *Can I remember what it was like to be an adolescent?*

Not *do* you remember, but *can* you remember. You may not have thought about it for years, but, if you try, can you remember? Can you recall looking for a place to sit in the cafeteria? The social positioning at football games and special events? Sitting in class and being so absorbed with a romantic crush the teacher’s words seemed a distant droning? Can you remember the dreams? Scoring the winning basket, rescuing the girl in distress, hoping a certain someone would ask you to homecoming, voicing the perfect comeback, or achieving the honor of being named valedictorian? Were you ever embarrassed beyond words by something you did, or shamed by something that happened to you? Was your world ever shattered by relational treachery? Were you ever in ecstasy because of a “perfect encounter” with the person you adored? How

about this—do you remember a time when God was at work in your heart, stirring your soul, seemingly close enough to touch?

If you can remember any of these things or how you felt at the time, you remember what it was like to be an adolescent. You can relate.

Question Two: *Are there any aspects of my life worth imitating?*

We're not talking about perfection here. Remember, the love of Christ is radical because it meets us where we are, not where we should be. *Young people need steps to climb, not cliffs to scale.* Can you recognize any growth in your character over the past several years? How about since you were in middle school? Are you making any progress in knowing God? In recognizing His ways? Have you experienced growth in your prayer life or understanding of Scripture since high school?

Answering *yes* to these two main questions is more basic to youthwork than earning five degrees. Why? Because empathizing with students and offering them a window into the character of God is central to helping them follow Christ.

3 There's a secret to Steve's coolness

We go to a conference every year where five thousand youthworkers gather for growth and encouragement. At the beginning of the conference they have everyone stand up who has been in youth work five years or more. Then they say, "Remain standing if you've been at it for ten years." They keep this up until just three or four are standing in the entire hall. Then they ask each one, "Tell us, how long have you been working with youth?"

Invariably, those still standing are humble, grey-haired veterans who quietly utter, "Oh, forty or fifty years."

These are the heroes. They are the unsung legends of youth ministry who were working with their own kids or investing in others long before “youthwork” was even a recognized occupation. They discovered it doesn’t matter how old you are, what you wear, or if you’re up on the latest music or movies. What matters is that you have an authentic walk with God and that you care about the young people in your world.

Youthwork, like parenting, is more about what’s caught than what’s taught. Can’t you just hear a middle school student saying something like this?

Steve is cool . . .

Steve loves God . . .

Me too. I love God too.

So here’s the million dollar question: *What makes Steve so cool?* Is he wearing the right stuff? Listening to the right music? Using the right words? Why is Steve bigger than life to this kid?

Because he loves the kid.

How else can you explain what happened between Mr. Jenkins and Tom? Mr. Jenkins had always been invisible to us, probably because we felt invisible to him. The same held true for Tom. We never gave him a passing thought, except to condemn him when we needed an ego boost. But love changed everything. Mr. Jenkins became a respected fixture in our youth group. Tom became a believer *and* an evangelist. And the rest of us learned to bring Christ to the kids at school rather than focusing on our own cliques and interests. In fact, the trickle-down from that Wednesday night surprise included my own decision to enter youth ministry, a calling I’m still engaged in several decades later.

4

“Follow me as I follow Christ”

Let's say there is a girl in your youth group named Andrea and she has an eating disorder. Does she need professional help? Yes. Especially if she's in immediate danger. But, in addition to making sure her short-term needs are met, don't forget about her long-term need. Like all of us, Andrea's thinking needs to be rooted in truth.

Does Andrea have value and worth as a person? Is she loved? Do others need what only she can bring into their lives? Does she have something to live for? Yes to all of these and more. If Andrea can learn to walk in truth, she will begin to see things through their proper lenses.

The trouble is, we spend half of our lives creating our own truth. We believe we are unwanted, unlovable, unworthy. Our lives don't matter, and our contributions make no difference. It doesn't seem like anyone cares, and why should they? Our experience in a broken world confirms these thoughts and so we convince ourselves they are true in order to justify our behavior.

So why can't we line all the kids up against the wall and tell them they're loved, valuable, and significant? Because that's not how beliefs form in the hearts of the young. Rather, they develop through the nurture of loving adults. Beliefs need to be seen, felt, double-checked, and tested. They need to hold up on good days and bad days. They can't be purchased from a medical examiner or a counseling expert. They don't come in nicely packaged, thirty-minute sessions.

Andrea has something few other teens have. She has a youth leader named Susie on her side. Susie is investing time and energy in Andrea's life. She has gained Andrea's trust, *and she has been a great listener*. As their lives intermingle over time, the younger watches the older like a hawk (though not always noticeably). Andrea's soul comes alive with hope as she hears stories of how Susie wrestles with her own body image. Susie is honest about how

she processes the input of family, friends, and the media. And Susie is unabashed in sharing how she came to know *and trust* Jesus in the tender, shame-filled areas of her life.

Susie doesn't tell Andrea what to think. She demonstrates what's true. And over time a *transfer* takes place. What Susie believes transfers to Andrea. This is the sacred core of youthwork. *Follow me as I follow Christ.*

5 This sure does cost a lot . . .

It's 10:30 p.m. and I'm completely drained. My day was horrendous, both emotionally and physically. For the past two hours I've been fighting sleep, but I have a problem. My living room is littered with students.

Rachel and Amy are sprawled on the couch, their dialogue crackling with intensity. A blizzard could pass through the room and they wouldn't notice.

Jacob, Vince, and Jonathan are playing guitars in the corner and I'm amazed, yet again, at how effortless it seems for those guys to play their own original stuff. It's that good.

My greatest joy, however, is that Anneliese, Sarah, and Courtney are talking on the hearth. The fire must be frying their backs, but they seem oblivious. That means Courtney is now "in the group."

I'm tired, I'm old, and as I carry dishes to the kitchen I'm banging the glasses against each other in a feeble attempt to remind them that group ended an hour ago. But it's no use. This is a Wednesday thing. A secret club where stories are told. A real, live facebook. My wife and I wouldn't trade it for anything. This semester we're helping students discover the lies that lurk in the shadows of their soul, energizing poor choices. Their inward journeys are the stuff of high adventure. To watch them morph before our very eyes is what keeps a couple of old, tired youthworkers going. Chances are you know exactly what I mean. Or you soon will. ●