



How to ...

Start a youth ministry from scratch

So, you are thinking about starting up some youth ministry at your church. Often the idea originates from someone (usually the vicar) kindly asking you to do something or 'Oh, we have a few young people now so what are we doing to do with them?' Whatever your scenario might be, working with young people can be an amazing privilege and it's not as scary as some make it out to be. But where do you start?

Even seasoned youth workers feel nervous about getting everything right. The reality is that there are a thousand different starting points and although this 'How to' guide does not provide all the answers to your situation; it will hopefully give you enough advice and ideas to begin the journey on the right foot.

1. Always begin with prayer

This basic principle shouldn't be glossed over especially during the foundational period of any ministry. This is a great time to enlist the help of the prayer warriors in your church who can pray for you and the work throughout the early stages and the life of its ministry.

2. Creating a conversation

Start by inviting key people and potential leaders to an informal discussion on youth ministry and the potential to work and minister with young people. Don't finalise anything just yet; instead simply spend time talking and praying through the opportunities, hopes (and expectations) and some of the possible outcomes with those who have a "heart" for the youth in your church/community.

If you have any young people in your church, ask them for their thoughts too on church, what would they like and is there anything they don't want? Remember, don't just listen to them; involve the young people, take into account their ideas and then seek to implement them into the youth ministry - they're more likely to come along!

3. Agreeing the vision

A solid, well thought through vision is also important when starting a youth ministry. Too often youth work can just happen with no long term goals so find out why people are interested in getting involved and create a vision around these principles so that everyone is happy with the outcome. God can work in these situations far more easily than when difference of opinion and conflict of interest prevails.

Try to make the vision easy to understand. Long, waffled vision statements can come across as monotonous so spend some time summarising your aims into a few easy to grasp sentences.

Remember that any youth ministry vision should complement the overall vision of the church. Include the church leadership in the process too as their support will be paramount especially when the youth ministry is launched.

3. Setting the benchmark

You've prayed, you've discussed and you've agreed on a collective vision. The next big step brings all those aspects together as to what the youth ministry will actually look like.

Interestingly, this is where so many youth ministries come unstuck. There can often be such immediate pressure to get something up and running that what is organised is rushed and formed around practical issues rather than giving the time to doing the groundwork first (planning, preparation and prayer).

Now is the time to think about the practicalities and to help you, below are the three most common types of youth ministry used in church-based youth work contexts:

Drop-in youth club

Aims & objectives:

- Get YPs off the street
- Give YPs something to do
- Provide a safe and caring environment
- Informal focus with minimal structured activities
- Build relationships amongst peers and leaders
- Focus on mission not ministry

Evening youth group

Aims & objectives:

- Provide a safe and caring environment
- More structure with organised activities / themed sessions
- Develop meaningful relationships within the group and leaders
- Informal opportunities for leaders to share faith

Discipleship group

Aims & objectives:

- Be a Christian community
 - Organised bible study and fellowship
 - Engage faith with real life
 - Develop meaningful relationships within the group
 - Build relationships with God
 - Focus on ministry not mission
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So, which model is right for you? Have you worked out which model you would like to run? If not, your answer should be guided using the following questions:

- 'Why do I want to start a youth ministry?'
- 'What's the aim of our youth ministry?'
- Have we asked the young people what they would like?

If you have followed the process from the beginning, the great news is that you have already discussed and answered these questions already. Perhaps the right question to ask is; which model is right for 'everyone'? Think about it... young people are more likely to come along to a club/group if they have been consulted on the matter and their thoughts/opinions have been listened to, valued and shaped the outcome.

4. Now it's preparation

You have figured out what you are going to do and now it's time to work out what you need to do get it off the ground. Just to give you an idea of how your choice of youth ministry type can affect your next steps;

- **Drop in youth club** - your first steps are securing a suitable venue if you haven't already (e.g. a hall), allocate funding for equipment/furniture (e.g. xbox, pool table etc.) and building up your volunteer team with relevant training to equip them in their roles (relationship skills, dealing with difficult behaviour, safeguarding etc.).
- **Evening youth group** – again, selecting the right venue (the church or elsewhere) and confirming financial support from the PCC, as this model of youth ministry is quite resource-heavy and will also need investment into equipping an energetic and creative team of leaders to spread the roles/responsibilities and keep things fresh.
- **Discipleship group** – the venue is not as important as for the other group types. What is important is that the youth leaders feel confident and competent sharing the Bible and conversations with passion and creativity.

5. Delegate Important Roles

Each time your team meets together you will get a better understanding of individual personalities, skills and potential. Discussing and delegating roles, especially non-essential tasks and roles, will give others a chance to contribute and feel a valued part of the team. Some people will naturally be leaders, others will be content just helping which is fine – these faithful people are worth their weight in gold too. Remember that everything won't be done perfectly first time but it will get done and your teens and volunteers will enjoy some ministry "ownership."

6. Set a Start Date

Yes, it may sound obvious but set a realistic start date which gives you plenty of time to fit in all the preparation and planning. Most importantly schedule in enough time for you and your leaders/helpers to meet together and bond as a team. Do not be tempted to rush this as experience shows that good, solid teams built on trust benefits both the short-term and the longevity of any type of pastoral ministry.

So, pick a start date and stick to it. Plan ahead, advertise and build a sense of excitement for the young people, your team and the wider church.

7. Involve the Church

Any youth ministry will need the church's full support to get off the ground and grow. With the minister/leadership teams backing, once the ball is rolling you'll have lots of opportunities to involve the church through publishing important updates and prayer requests in the church bulletins, making public announcements and inviting key people to visit the ministry.

8. Re-evaluate and Refocus

So you have made it across the line, the youth ministry is going swimmingly, or maybe you have had some teething trouble; that's OK, that's the unpredictable nature of youth ministry! Expect obstacles and roadblocks from time to time, be realistic, focus on the task-at-hand but also keep your vision in focus too, accepting that changes are inevitable in any form of ministry. Most importantly, upholding your values and principles will keep you in good stead.

After each session/calendar year, meet as a team to reflect on past events. Simply answering these simple questions will enable you and your team to evaluate the ministry, grow as reflective practitioners and enhance the ministry to young people:

- How was the session/How has the year been?
- What was good about the session/What have been the highlights?
- Did anything go wrong? Have there been any lowlights?
- What can we do better next time/Do we need to change anything next year?

9. Persevere and Rest

Youth ministry does require a constant commitment. Invest plenty of time into your team and you will be blessed with a happy, motivated and committed bunch. Finally, besides meeting the spiritual needs of teens and their families, remember that you will need to love and care for yours too. Don't neglect your own spiritual needs for rest and refilling and refreshment. God cares about you first and foremost and your relationship with Him top trumps everything else.

10. Further Information

Martin Saunders has also written a fantastic book on exactly this topic which is available from this link: <https://youthscape.co.uk/store/product/youth-work-from-scratch>

Gale Richards and Linda Hopkins have written a Grove Booklet (Y31) entitled 'Starting from Scratch': <https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/y-31-starting-from-scratch>

If you would like further advice exploring or setting up a youth ministry in your church, please contact Daniel Jones (Youth & Children's Adviser) to discuss this further on: 0117 906 0100 | daniel.jones@bristoldiocese.org

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