

# Do Youth Ministers Need to know how to Preach?

Graham Stanton  
Principal  
Youthworks College



**YOUTHWORKS COLLEGE**

*Engage your mind, energise your ministry.*

As someone passionate about seeing people equipped and energised for gospel ministry among children and young people I welcome the establishment of Cornhill Sydney and share the vision for better preaching and teaching of God's word in our churches. Thinking specifically about children's and youth ministry, two questions arise, each coming from the opposite perspective: On the one hand some will ask, why would a children's or youth minister ever need to know how to preach? While at the same time others will ask, why would a children's or youth minister need to know anything *other than* how to preach?

To answer both questions we need to step back and consider what we think 'effective' children's and youth ministry looks like. What are we hoping that children's and youth ministry would achieve?

At this point we discover a surprisingly large range of opinions. Across the youth ministry world there are the usual distinctions between ministries that focus on social justice, church rituals, praise and worship, or evangelism and discipleship. Just as there are various traditions of Christian ministry among adults, the same variety of emphases exists in youth ministry. This is not particularly surprising. The surprising thing is that within the reformed evangelical church tradition, known for a focus on biblical evangelism and discipleship, there is such a range of goals when it comes to ministering to those who are young.

Some ministries, whether by intention or practice, suggest that youth ministry exists primarily to entertain young people. Given the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity prevalent in today's world, church youth ministries are there to provide a haven of moral values and physical safety for children and young people. Here's a place where young people can have a good time without being in danger of ending up in hospital or prison.

Others would say that youth ministry exists to prepare for the future. 'Young people are the future of the church' is the rallying cry. So the aim of children's and youth ministry is to keep young people occupied within the church community so that when they are adults they will still be around and able to start engaging fruitfully in church life.

In many churches children's and youth ministry operates as part of the strategy to attract and retain young families in the church. 'If the kids are happy the parents will stay'. And given that parents who stay are parents who give when the offertory plate comes past, it is imperative that the youth minister keeps the kids happy.

I am very much in favour of keeping children and young people out of hospital and out of prison. I pray earnestly that young people would continue as members of the church into their adult years, and I want young people to be enthusiastic about going to church and for them to encourage their parents to stay engaged in the church community (and to be generous with their money!). But, none of these goals are sufficient to be the main aim of the children's and youth ministry in our churches.

**Our goal in children's and youth ministry is to glorify God by sharing the gospel with young people so that they would be able to respond appropriately to him in all their lives.** Our concern is for how young people live now as well as whether they will live in eternity; and this is our concern because God's glory demands a life lived in response to him now and his purposes for us extend to eternity. Young people are the church *today* as much as they will be the church in the future. And given that young people are likely to face times of great sadness as well as great joy, rather than promoting happiness, our bigger concern is that they know the presence and love of God in all of their lives.

Therefore, children's and youth ministry must be Word ministry.

Effective children's and youth ministry must be Bible-based, Christ-focussed, and missionally-engaged ministry. This I pray will be the sort of preaching and teaching that students of Cornhill Sydney will be trained in. Our world needs teachers and preachers who know the Scriptures and can demonstrate how all the law and the prophets speak of Christ so that they might make disciples of all nations.

That's why children's and youth ministers need to preach and teach. For children and young people to know God and respond faithfully to him they need to be taught from the Scriptures. This doesn't always mean preaching—there is (or should be) Word ministry going on all the time in pastoral conversations, choosing songs, times of prayer and leading discussions. But given that the gospel is God's declaration rather than a human conclusion it is imperative that in some way God's ministers stand in the gathering of his people, whether young or old, to declare this good news. Gospel proclamation must be at the centre of an effective children's or youth ministry program.

There is also good reason for youth ministers to take on the responsibility of preaching among the adult congregations of the church. Youth ministers are both advocates and guides for young people and preaching to adults is a great context in which to do both those things.

One thing a preaching youth minister can do is to apply the text of Scripture to families in their role of being primary faith-trainers of their children. In that way they are continuing to help guide young people in their faith. A preaching youth minister can helpfully include a few thoughts in each sermon on 'how this applies to parents and carers as you raise your children in the faith'. Even the repetition of the question will be educative in itself and thus a service to children and young people in their families.

As well as being guides, youth ministers are also advocates for the young. Youth ministers know that God is at work in the lives of children and teenagers. This is something that adults in the church either don't realise, or can too easily forget. A preaching youth minister can helpfully point out what God has been doing among the youth and children to the other members of the church family. Stories about what God is doing in the lives of the young people in the church can inform and encourage and help build a church family where young people are valued and appreciated.

Congregational preaching isn't just an additional ministry to be balanced alongside the responsibilities of youth ministry, but can be an important aspect of a youth ministers' service of the young in the name of Christ.

But do youth ministers need to learn anything more than simply to preach and teach?

It's like asking whether senior ministers need to do anything more than preach and teach? Of course the answer is yes! Cornhill Sydney is presented as a foundation for those going on to further biblical and theological study, and encourages those who are gifted and have a passion for full-time Bible teaching ministry to do further training in a Bible or theological college. The same is true for those who are gifted and passionate about ministry among children and young people.

In particular effective children's and youth ministry calls for leaders who can be theologically grounded pastors who are culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate. We need leaders who can reflect theologically on the place of children and young people within their families and within the family of the church. We need leaders who can respond to the questions and pastoral

needs of children and young people with theological insight and clarity. We need leaders who can discern the cultural voices that impact children and young people today and know how to respond faithfully in that context. We need leaders who are able to communicate the gospel to children and young people in a way that they are able to understand and engage with according to their developmental capacity.

Youthworks College is committed to equipping people of all ages for effective ministry among children and young people. Incorporating biblical and theological study with ministry skills, and engagement in cultural and developmental studies, the Youthworks College program provides comprehensive foundational study for children's and youth ministry and opens pathways to further study and formal ministry.

We are glad to be able to partner with Cornhill Sydney to help provide the opportunity for children's and youth ministers to develop further skill in biblical preaching and teaching.

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11 Fifth Avenue, Loftus, NSW  
PO Box 256, Sutherland, NSW 1499  
P: +612 8093 3400  
W: [www.youthworkscollege.edu.au](http://www.youthworkscollege.edu.au)  
E: [college@youthworks.net](mailto:college@youthworks.net)