

Managing to Stick Around, Part One by Syler Thomas (originally appeared in *Youthworker Journal*, Jan/Feb 08)

I was shocked. On the phone was the mother of a student who had graduated from high school three years ago. I hadn't seen the young woman since then, and the parents didn't attend our church; so they weren't even on my radar screen.

"We have good reason to believe Jenny is doing hard drugs, so we're planning an intervention with a counselor," the mother said. "As someone who has had a spiritual influence on her life, we'd like to have you present for it."

As I hung up the phone, I prayed for the family. Then I had two thoughts. The first was this: I'm honored they thought to call me. The second was, If I wasn't the youth pastor here anymore, I wouldn't be around to participate.

I've been at one church for 10 years. This is nothing compared to the 20-year-plus veterans out there (you're my heroes), but they are the exception. Too many youth ministers last two or three years at a church, then move on to the next—and the next.

RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TIME

The success of a youth ministry, more so than perhaps any other area of ministry, is dependent on the longevity of its leader. Why? Because effective youth ministry is relational, and deep relationships can only be built over time.

I cringe to think of my attitude when I took this position. I was still in seminary, looking to get some experience before heading off to do something else. Talking with two youth pastor friends about how long I'd be staying, I said, "I don't know, maybe a year or two?" One of them chuckled and said, "Then you might as well not even take the job."

As I soon discovered, most of the first 18 months is spent simply building relationships and trust. Now I'm amazed at what I'm able to accomplish, compared to the early years, simply because of the fact that people know and trust me. Woody Allen is credited with saying, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." You've got to show up, and a big part of showing up is not leaving too soon.

KEEPING IT FRESH

I'm not saying that once we've gotten comfortable in ministry we should just lock things in and coast. We have to find ways to keep our vision fresh. Yesterday's manna cannot feed us today. And I also don't mean to suggest that all youth ministers should stay at one church their whole lives. Leaving a ministry doesn't mean you're a quitter. In many cases, it's completely appropriate. But you should make sure you're leaving for the right reasons.

Have you ever noticed there are thousands of high school teachers who stay at their schools for years and years, while youth pastors move around? Why is that? Sometimes I think we can over-spiritualize the concept of a "call" and think it's more mystical than it

actually is. If you've found a good fit at a church, then you've been called there, and just because you've been there for a while doesn't mean it's necessarily time to leave.

We can sometimes misinterpret our own wanderlust as something from God, and that may or may not be the case. If you've achieved success in a ministry, others will hear about it; and you'll likely be approached by a church looking for a youth pastor. It's flattering, and it's OK to listen. But there's also nothing unspiritual about saying no thanks, things are going well here.

I'm inspired by Rick Warren's prayer when he started Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. He asked that it be the only church he pastored his whole life. So far God has said yes to that request. May we have the same resolve to stay the course.