

## Managing the Reluctant by Syler Thomas

What do you do with students that don't want to be there?

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Sometimes it can make a guy long to pack it all in and be a plumber when you're forced, week in and week out, to deal with the Back Row Club: the crew that comes late and leaves early, doesn't laugh at *your* jokes, but cracks up when *they* make one. I think my all-time favorite Student Who Would Rather Be Anywhere Else Than at Youth Group was the guy who showed up about an hour late one night with a steaming hot large Domino's pepperoni pizza and a 20 ounce Coke. He walked into our relatively small group gathered that night, pulled up a folding chair, and began eating the entire pizza, with brief stops to guzzle his Coke. He then left early, speaking to no one. Thanks for squeezing us into your schedule, buddy! And no, we weren't hungry, so no need to share!

But what do we do? Are we happy they're at least giving it a try, or is their reluctance causing them to only resent the church and bringing others down?

Certainly there are plenty of stories that would suggest that parents who forced their kids to attend youth group were grateful later that they did. One such success story is Cassie Bernall, one of the victims of the Columbine shootings, made famous because "she said yes." Her faith was drifting, she started hanging with a bad crowd, and her parents intervened, requiring her to attend a church youth retreat. They feared their insistence could have pushed her away, but she came around, devoted her life to Christ, and famously died as a martyr, unashamedly professing her faith in God in the face of her murderers. Who knows what would have happened had her parents not intruded the way they did?

A less dramatic story happened in our ministry with a student named Jeremy. My first year as youth pastor was his freshman year, and he did not know what to make of me, or the ministry. His parents made a rule: he had to attend youth group once a month for the first year, no questions asked. He grudgingly agreed (it wasn't like he had a choice), but over time he began looking forward to his monthly visit, until he would ask to go on Sundays he wasn't required. Jeremy attended mission trips with our group every summer, and is now a junior in college, still a committed Christian.

But for every Jeremy, there's also a Trevor. Trevor attended our group exactly one-half time. I say one-half because halfway through his only visit, he called his dad and explained with horror that "all they're doing is *singing* up there. Come get me!" His dad did come get him, and he never returned.

Parents want to know what to do with their student that doesn't naturally gravitate towards the ministry, so what do we tell them?

### GIVE IT A SHOT

Encourage parents to make their kids at least try it. As a teenager, the biggest draw to any event will be the other people that are there. If a student doesn't have good friends that are also excited about attending, chances are they will not want to be there. This

means that the student either has to sweat it out alone or is forced to make new friends, which can be excruciatingly difficult, especially for a shy student.

Incidentally, this is why training your adult and student leaders to be diligent about seeking out new and unconnected students is absolutely essential. You can't be expected to go after these students on your own, and we have to be constantly reminding our leaders that they play a huge role in this.

When they're freshmen, they're even more likely to never want to be there for one reason or another. So your best opportunity to instruct a parent will come when their children are transitioning into high school ministry. If a student is diametrically opposed to coming, I suggest using Jeremy's parents technique: come to some sort of compromise so that the student remains involved, in hopes that connections will be made. Special events like fun nights and especially retreats and mission trips are key, as new friendships are more likely to be forged then. Other parents have given their child a choice between several options: they have to attend either Sunday morning services, small group, large group, or perhaps a Young Life event at least once a week. The problem with this scenario is that a student might choose only to attend Sunday mornings, figuring that at least it gets it out of the way. They can sit in the pew and go home, never making friends or being forced to actively engage their faith. This scenario, while better than nothing, holds the least amount of promise in actually getting them to take the next step in their faith.

You also have to be honest about the fact that a student that doesn't want to be there can be a distraction to those that do. Parents aren't doing anyone any favors by forcing their children to attend, and then letting them talk and cut up the whole night. The reluctant students are resentful, others are annoyed, and you the youth leader are frustrated. Which can lead you to...

#### RECOGNIZE WHEN IT'S NOT WORKING

You may have to make the call at some point that if a student can't behave themselves, and they're clearly not enjoying themselves, they can't participate any longer. This may seem like a failure, but if the student is unwilling to submit to your authority, you have no choice.

We also have to come to terms with the fact that any given group is not going to be the answer for every student. For instance, our ministry doesn't play a lot of games and we have about twenty-five minutes of music each week, so we're probably not going to be very attractive to a really macho guy who likes games and doesn't like to sing. Be ready to suggest an alternative to a parent who still wants their child in a Christian group. Perhaps suggesting a Young Life group or even another youth group in the area would be a good idea. Or if the student would feel more comfortable in a small group setting, steer the student to a mid-week small group that meets in a home instead.

You'll also need to be sensitive to the parents who are faced with their students' lack of interest. For some, the whole reason they're in your church might be because they hoped their child would connect with the youth ministry. When this doesn't happen, it's quite

possible that they will resent you, or feel like God has failed them. Be prepared to help them deal with this disappointment in a gracious way.

#### REACH OUT TO THE RELUCTANT

If you know of students that are especially unconnected, it would be important for you to try and reach out to them outside of the big group. Throughout his high school career, I would take Trevor out to lunch once a year and we continue to have a decent friendship. I don't hold it against him, and hope that he connects with another Christian group later. His parents greatly appreciated the time I took to reach out as well. In my day-timer, I have two lists of students I go after, a "Teach" and a "Reach" list. It's discipleship and evangelism. Both are necessary, and both require pursuing students.

Having said that, you also need to realize that your time is limited, and you can't spend it all pursuing students that clearly have no interest in being pursued. Above all, it's important to keep the balance between going after the 1, and tending to the 99 in front of you. It's very easy for you to beat yourself up over the 1, thinking that it's your fault that they're not connecting. You must simply extend your open arms to the wandering, and then shepherd the flock that is placed in your care, leaving the rest to the Good Shepherd.