

LAYERS OF LEARNING

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Unawareness: Couldn't care less

Awareness: Notice, but uncertain it's true

Interest: Think it could be important

Acceptance: Tested against experience - seems to be true

Conviction: Important to Me and to Others

Commitment: Overriding importance to me -
determines how I feel and act

STAGE ONE: UNAWARENESS

Nowhere in Scripture are we called to go out into all the world and make Christians; we are called to make disciples. God makes Christians and people make disciples. But to have discipleship without evangelism would be like trying to nurture a plant that has never been planted.

Sometimes our neglect of this truth leads us to build a youth ministry that is ingrown, that has no vision for outreach. Jesus called his followers to be fishers of men. I don't know much about fishing, but I do know that fish rarely lunge up out of the water and jump into a net sitting on the dock. A youth ministry program should include some hooks to bait youth with no spiritual background.

What we must understand is that, if we are moving our youth forward through the primary stages of unawareness and then into awareness, we are nurturing students. We are helping them grow, spiritually. The harvest begins with the sowing of the seed.

Sometimes we forget this principle. We hear and read about the ministries around us with huge numbers of students who are deeply spiritual, fired up about Jesus, list Old Testament passages under their senior pictures in the yearbook, and we get discouraged. "Look at our kids. They're spiritual wimps! We must not be doing a good job." Not necessarily.

STAGE TWO: AWARENESS

The second stage of the adolescent's spiritual odyssey is characterized by increasing awareness. At this point, the youth begins to take notice of spiritual matters, but is unconvinced of their importance. This stage of spiritual development might be likened to that point at which Jesus has spit on the eyes of the blind man of Bethsaida (a unique evangelistic strategy, not necessarily recommended by the author) so that he could see people, but they looked "like trees walking around" (Mark 8:23, 24). It's not yet sight, but it's no longer total blindness.

The key to ministry at this stage, as Jesus' own example so well illustrates, is the ministry of personal touch - meeting student's felt needs. We ought to take note of that. When I first became a Christian I had the mistaken notion that if I could just provide convincing arguments in favor of the faith, I would be able to direct people's attention to Christ. The progression to awareness may take different forms, but at its heart is personal relationship - the personal touch.

One might ask, if gaining awareness is such a relational ministry, what is the point of large, evangelistic, rally-type meetings? Good question. The answer is that large gatherings give leaders a context in which to make contact with non-Christian kids.

STAGE THREE: INTEREST

At this point in spiritual development, the teenager is beginning to feel that this God talk may be important, but there is really no decision made yet. The apostle Paul often met with this kind of response as he preached to audiences who were largely unaware of the Christian Gospel.

His audience at the Areopagus in Athens was composed of people who were well-versed in various man-made religions and philosophies, but essentially unaware of the good news of Christ. When Paul spoke to them, their response was not surprisingly mixed. Some mocked him, some got angry, but some were interested. They wanted to hear more (Acts 17:32).

At the point that the students begin to show some interest, we must boldly, clearly, and attractively explain the plan of the Gospel. The only real danger for those of us in youth ministry is that we allow ourselves to be intimidated and back off. Some youth workers think that the way to get kids interested in Jesus is by never mentioning His name. There is such fear in some quarters of turning off our youth that we never turn them on.

No one is suggesting that we be rude or pushy. We need to be up-front, honest, and straightforward, answering the questions and hearing the doubts. Even if we do all of that, there will still be some teenagers who just aren't ready yet. They may mock us, or they may just disappear. But there will be others who are interested in hearing more.

STAGE FOUR: ACCEPTANCE

By this stage, youth are beginning to test some of what they are hearing against experience. They begin to say, "This may be true." This is acceptance. It is not wholehearted affirmation, but it is progress.

The ministry of nurture, at this point, will consist of prayer and encouragement. One of the major sources of encouragement for students struggling with whether to accept Christ or not is hearing from their peers about how Christ can make a difference in life.

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Some of us in youth ministry have gotten so sophisticated in recent years that we overlook the impact of a good old-fashioned personal testimony. And that's too bad. From what we are learning about the ways that teenagers make decisions, it is clear that they find personal stories and testimonies far more persuasive than carefully constructed theological proofs.

It is also critical at this point that the teenagers become integrally involved in some form of Christian community or fellowship. Christian nurture must take into account the supreme importance of peer influence on one's spiritual growth.

Surrounded by peers who are working through the same spiritual truths, the next stage in the teenager's acceptance comes in the form of subjective standards. The individual student begins to acquire some warm fuzzies, some feelings about God that are warm and positive. They are not convictions and they are easily swayed, but they are signs of progress. The best way to nurture this subjective commitment is by continued exposure to positive peer support through retreats, small group ministry and sharing groups. But beyond that, we need to attempt to add biblical teaching and content to the equation. In short, we need to help these kids find reasons for and understand why they are feeling some of what they are feeling.

Eventually, we will want to move the youth into the third stage of acceptance, in which they begin to formulate beliefs based more on the objective truth of the faith than on their feelings.

Unfortunately this is a transfer that seldom takes place. The kids in the youth group believe in God because other kids around them believe in God. The problem, of course, is that these students will eventually find themselves around other groups of people - and their patterns and lifestyle may not be as Christ-centered. A faith based on warm fuzzies will eventually cool down.

That is why building groups and sharing feelings are no substitute for sound biblical teaching and the communication of Christian truth. We are trying to build people whose faith is based on convictions, even if they must stand alone in those convictions.

STAGE FIVE: CONVICTION

This is the point at which the moral or spiritual conviction is internalized: "This is what I believe even if everyone around me thinks I'm a jerk." A conviction is a belief held firmly enough that we are convinced of its importance not only to ourselves, but to others.

STAGE SIX: COMMITMENT

By this final stage, spiritual development has progressed to the point that it determines our feelings and our actions. Obviously, just as there is a progression leading up to this stage of commitment, there is a progression of growth within this stage of commitment.

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As someone said, "We receive all of Christ at the moment of conversion; then we spend the rest of our lives allowing Christ to receive all of us."

LITTLE BY LITTLE

When we talk about a student making a commitment to Christ, it sounds quick and easy—just like when we talk about a farmer "growing his crops." But that quick and easy phrase betrays the fact that growth takes time, sweat, patience and prayer.

The encounter between a teenager and his God is a long road that may begin with relative unawareness and progress through long, seemingly endless stages before it blossoms into genuine conviction and commitment.

That is the biblical pattern of spiritual growth. It's not quick or easy. It takes God years to raise an oak tree, but he can make a mushroom overnight. Most of us in youth ministry have put in years waiting on the nuts in our groups to do something. In time, perhaps they will. For now, those of us involved and committed to a ministry of nurture with teenagers need to be reminded that progress is a process.