6 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY ATTENDANCE DECLINES

Okay, youth pastors. Picture this.

It's **15 minutes** before your weekly program begins, and you've got everything planned. Your message is going to be awesome. You've got your best worship playlist cued up. You just stocked up on a fresh batch of Doritos. Plus, you're *finally* going to cave and set up one of those Impossible Shot contests you've seen in every youth ministry's Instagram stories.

But now it's **10 minutes** until service begins and ... well, you notice your crowd seems a little smaller than usual. **5 minutes,** and you're wondering if maybe today is a national holiday you'd forgotten about? Now it's time for your program to begin, and you're trying really hard not to count the empty seats. Sound familiar?

Whether your youth ministry averages five or 500 teenagers each week, we're guessing you know what this feels like:

- **The disappointment** of realizing your attendance isn't what you expected.
- **The frustration** that your teenagers may not be as passionate, interested, or invested as you'd hoped.
- **The pressure** to keep your numbers steady, or even growing.

If you've ever struggled with low attendance, you're not alone. We've been there, and, actually, just about every youth pastor we've ever met has been there. You don't need to be in ministry very long before you begin hearing the stories of youth workers who feel discouraged, frustrated, and under pressure to grow their ministries. Worrying about numbers and attendance kind of comes with the territory in youth ministry.

But just because drops in attendance are to be expected doesn't mean we shouldn't do anything about them, and just because number fluctuations are usually normal doesn't mean there's not sometimes a deeper problem that needs to be solved. So **what, exactly, should you do about declines in attendance?** (You know, besides giving away an Xbox or bribing teenagers with pizza so they invite their friends?)

Well, that's something our team at Stuff You Can Use has been talking about for a while. If we could sit down with every youth pastor who's feeling discouraged about their numbers, we've wondered, "What would we say? How could we help, encourage, or maybe even challenge our youth ministry pals?"

Well, here's what we came up with. We may not have all the answers, but we've spent a lot of years doing ministry, volunteering in ministry, and learning from some pretty incredible youth ministry people. So the next time your numbers are discouraging you, **here are 6 steps to staying sane, moving forward, and maybe even growing your attendance numbers.**

WHAT TO DO WHEN ATTENDANCE DROPS:

1. DON'T PANIC

Here's the thing. **Fluctuations in your attendance patterns are completely normal.** Sometimes, those patterns are universal, like:

- Increases at the beginning of the school year or after Easter.
- Decreases over the summer, during final exams, or when sports seasons kick in.
- On top of that, you're going to have patterns that are unique to you. Your attendance might drop the week of your town's annual chicken wing festival, when Taylor Swift comes to your city, or when that one family with nineteen kids goes out of town.

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The point is that attendance will fluctuate. So don't panic. Instead, pay attention to those patterns and try to figure out when and why they happen. Because if you can predict it, you won't be so surprised or discouraged when it happens next time—plus, you'll be able to provide context to your numbers if anyone asks. So expect fluctuations, and prepare for them too.

And remember, where attendance is concerned, **you're probably not as awesome as your best attendance day, and you're definitely not as bad as your worst attendance day.**

2. DON'T COMPARE

We're all tempted sometimes to compare our numbers to the numbers of other ministries. But maybe today, you need a quick reminder of something you already know: comparison kills joy. So don't compare yourself to anyone else. **Your ministry, your church, and your teenagers are unique and uniquely resourced.** That's exactly the way God designed it. So be you. And don't compare yourself to the church down the street or the ministries you see all over Instagram, okay?

3. CLARIFY WHAT MATTERS

When attendance drops, don't hear us saying numbers don't matter. Numbers do matter because **every number on that attendance spreadsheet represents a person, a life, and a family you're caring for.** It makes sense to want to include and care for more and more teenagers. But the number of teenagers who show up each week doesn't tell the entire story. Your ministry's effectiveness can't be summarized by your weekly attendance reports alone.

Your attendance can tell you some things about your ministry's effectiveness, but it can't tell you *everything.* That's why clarifying what matters most to your church—you know, besides getting kids to show up each week is important. Once you know what matters most, you can look for ways other than weekly attendance to measure your success and impact. For example, you probably want your group to grow spiritually, right? Then try measuring some numbers that could indicate if they are or not, like:

- How many teenagers are serving in your church or their community.
- How many teenagers made commitments to Jesus.
- What percentage of your teens are engaged in a small group.
- How often does a first-time visitor actually come back.

If spiritual growth is what matters most, then those numbers matter even more than your weekly attendance numbers. And they're a lot more interesting, too.

4. FOCUS ON WHO'S THERE

Have you ever made the mistake of saying something like this in front of your teenagers on a low attendance day: "Wow, where is everybody?" When you're visibly disappointed about drops in attendance in front of your teenagers, it's a pretty good way to kill the vibe. Imagine how a teenager in the room might feel if they heard you wondering "where everyone is." Like, "Uh, I'm here! Am I not good enough for you?" So when attendance declines unexpectedly, **don't let disappointment distract you from those right in front of you.** You've still got ministry to do.

Sure, maybe a drop in attendance means you can't play that gigantic game of Hungry Hungry Hippos you were looking forward to, but a week with a smaller group of teenagers is an incredible opportunity to build relationships and spend more focused time with those who are there. You'll have plenty of time to worry about who isn't there later. But for now, be present with those who are. You never know—your attention might be exactly what one of those teenagers needed that week.

5. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEMS

Now that we've spent some time feeling encouraged and remembering that our identity and success aren't determined by the number of teenagers who show up each week, we can't leave things there. We've got to talk about some harder things, too.

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- Yes, sometimes attendance fluctuations are out of your control.
- No, your attendance numbers aren't the whole picture.
- And yes, sometimes a smaller group of teenagers allows you to do better ministry.
- But while low attendance isn't always a problem, **low attendance *can* be a symptom of a very real problem.**

When your attendance drops, **take time to identify the problems in your ministry—or maybe even in your leadership.** Because, let's be honest, none of us are actually good at *everything* in ministry, so it's okay to admit you have a weak spot or two. You're not good at everything and don't have to be good at everything. But as a leader, you've got to know what you're not good at so you can put systems (or even other people) in place to help you be better in the areas where you're growing.

So if you really are seeing drops in attendance that can't be explained by something obvious, like holidays, exams, community events, or global pandemics, it's time to start looking deeper.

To help you identify what those deeper problems might be, we broke this down into 7 areas of ministry where problems tend to show up. (If you're familiar with Grow Curriculum & Annual Strategy, these 7 areas might sound familiar.)

If your numbers are dropping, start with this list and ask, "Where are the problems?" Because one or more of these areas of ministry could be impacting the drop in your attendance.

1. **WEEKLY ENVIRONMENT:** Is your weekly youth ministry program a place where teenagers actually want to be? And do they actually want to bring their friends? If not, what might the problem be?
2. **TEACHING:** In both your large group teaching and smaller group discussions, do teenagers feel they're hearing something relevant, memorable, and worth listening to? And are they doing something about what they hear? If not, what might the problem be?
3. **DISCIPLESHIP:** Beyond what happens during your teaching time, do teenagers have the tools to grow spiritually? Are they inspired to be more like Jesus? If not, what might the problem be?
4. **EVENTS:** Are the special events on your calendar really making a difference, rather than just using up time and resources? Do teenagers want to show up to them? If not, what might the problem be?
5. **VOLUNTEERS:** Do you have enough volunteers? Do the volunteers you have feel equipped, empowered, and released to do significant ministry? Do they like showing up to invest, serve, and lead? If not, what might the problem be?
6. **FAMILIES:** Do the parents or caregivers of your teenagers feel supported and cared for by your ministry? Do they believe in what you're doing? Do they trust you with their teenagers? If not, what might the problem be?
7. **LEADERSHIP:** Is your ministry known for having a plan, a strategy, and systems that are reliable? Can teenagers, volunteers, and families trust that your ministry will lead them toward greater growth and health? If not, what might the problem be?

Remember, you are not going to be naturally excellent in all seven of these areas, so **your job as a leader is to identify the problems**—but to do that, you're going to need honesty.

- **BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.** Like, ruthlessly honest. None of this wishful-thinking or rose-colored-glasses stuff. Be honest about the weak spots in your ministry and in your own personal leadership.
- **ASK OTHERS TO BE HONEST WITH YOU.** Ask people you trust to give you feedback on both you and your ministry so you can begin to identify the potential problems. Talk to co-workers and mentors. Talk to volunteers. Talk to parents. Talk to teenagers. Ask them to help you identify your weakest areas, and really listen.

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Wherever those problem areas are for you, please don't be discouraged. It means you're one step closer to diagnosing and solving the source of your attendance problems and making your ministry healthier overall. This part of the process requires humility and courage. It's not always fun, but it's worth it. If one of your weak spots is causing your numbers to shrink or is preventing you from growing, a fancy new youth space or an Xbox giveaway won't fix your attendance problems. The only thing that will help is identifying and addressing the real problems.

6. DREAM UP SOLUTIONS

We've covered a lot, but there's one more step you can take when your attendance drops and it might be the most important one. After you've not panicked or compared, clarified what matters, focused on who's there, and identified your problems, here's your last step: **start dreaming up solutions that address your biggest problems and help pave the way for long-term growth.**

Maybe you've noticed, but you can't really *force* numerical growth. Not in a healthy way, anyway. If you want real, long-term, sustainable growth, you're going to have to identify your big-picture problems and put strategies in place to solve them. In other words, if you want your ministry to grow, you need to first decide what kind of growth you want.

- If you care more about *numerical* growth than healthy growth, then sure! Quick fixes (like big giveaways, a social media campaign, or a cool event) will probably work. **But just because something grows in size doesn't mean it's healthy or good.** Quick fixes to attendance problems aren't sustainable or healthy and don't address your ministry's actual problems. Instead, they simply distract from the real problems that need to be addressed.
- But if you care about *healthy* growth, you know the "fruit" your ministry produces is the real indicator of your ministry's success—and "fruit" isn't synonymous with "numbers." So instead of trying to get your numbers up in the short term (like before your next staff meeting or annual evaluation), think about how to make your ministry healthier in the long term.

We know fluctuating attendance patterns can be hard, and discouraging, and frustrating. But remember: **your success as a youth pastor isn't determined by your weekly attendance. It's determined by the fruit your ministry produces.** So take a breath, hang in there, and keep working to better care for the teenagers and families you've been called to serve.

And if you need help creating a strategy for healthy growth, we have some ideas that could help.



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