**Volunteer Engagement and Retention in Student Ministry**

Matthew McNutt, DMin

*Pastor, Student Ministry*

*Brandywine Valley Church*

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## ABSTRACT

Volunteer retention is a critical but often overlooked aspect of youth ministry leadership. While many resources address recruiting and training, few explore what contributes to volunteers serving long-term. This paper draws on a mixed-methods study, including a survey of 342 youth pastors, interviews with 14 youth pastors, and 8 long-tenured volunteers, to identify six key factors in volunteer longevity: *Clarity, Training, Relational Connections, Meaningful Service, Rest, and Appreciation*. Grounded in Scripture, research, and practical insights, the findings offer actionable strategies for youth pastors who recognize the importance of consistent Christian adults walking alongside adolescents during their formative years. The findings presented in this paper are a condensed version of the author’s dissertation presented to Palmer Theological Seminary in the spring of 2025.

### Background Information

The world in which American young people experience adolescence is an increasingly difficult one. Societal pressures, family difficulties, isolation, loneliness, impossible standards, have left adolescents with increasingly declining mental health. According to the CDC, as of 2021[[1]](#footnote-1):

* 42% of high school students have experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.
* 29% of high school students have experienced poor mental health.
* 22% of high school students have seriously considered attempting suicide.
* 10% of high school students have attempted suicide.

Nearly a third of adolescents have an anxiety disorder, with 8.3% of adolescents having a severe impairment due to anxiety.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Kara Powell and Brad Griffin note, “anxiety is the most common psychological disorder in the US.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Mark Cannister writes, “For many young people, growing up in a postmodern culture is about growing up alone. This is an emotional aloneness that seeps into the core of one’s being.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Chap Clark identifies systemic abandonment as a defining experience for today’s adolescents.[[5]](#footnote-5) From adolescents’ perspective, they have been abandoned by adults as they view “neighbors, relatives, teachers, coaches, pastors, priests, and parents as too busy or too self-absorbed to invest in them without an agenda.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

According to Powell and Griffin, “loneliness and the search for friends” is one of the primary drivers for adolescents.[[7]](#footnote-7) Mark Oestreicher observes, “‘Come be with us,’ could be the most powerful thing a teenager in today’s youth culture hears.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Aresi, Pozzi and Marta write, “Supportive, intergenerational relationships with non-parent adults have been recognized as key resources for healthy development.”[[9]](#footnote-9) They note that some of the benefits of these relationships include academic benefits and social-emotional development.

One of the changes needed in many churches is their view of adolescents. Richard Lerner cautions that adolescents are not “problems to be fixed, but people to be developed. They are not immature or incomplete adults; they are active partners in their own positive transition to adulthood.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Adolescents have a deep and urgent need for stable adults to be consistently present throughout their middle school and high school years, giving them unconditional love, support, listening to them, and modeling a pursuit of Christlikeness to them. Geiger and Borton write, “Teenagers need relationships with godly adults. Teenagers see little consistency in this world, and they need to be confronted with the consistency of Christ through an adult who loves Jesus and them.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Dean, Foster, and DeWald write, “Of particular importance to young people is friendship with an adult who sees in them potential they do not necessarily see in themselves.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Importantly, “the majority of people who become followers of Christ do so before they graduate high school.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Churches have a critical responsibility to meet these spiritual and emotional needs through intentional student ministry. It is the belief of this author that one of the greatest legacies the leader of a student ministry program can leave a church is a team of volunteers who are invested in the ministry for the long-haul, who are actively present and engaged in the lives of the students throughout their middle school and high school years.

### Research Problem

While the average adolescent will not articulate this desire – indeed, most are not even fully aware of it while at the same time desperately longing for it – young people are starving for consistent, regular contact with adults that care about them. This care manifests in adults’ willingness to listen to them, spend time with them, attend their sporting events or dance recitals, and love them unconditionally. Adolescence is one of the most dramatic times of upheaval and change in a person’s life. Having adults consistently present to help navigate those challenges and changes creates stability and a healthier outlook on life, increasing the chances of the young person growing into a healthy adult.

As already noted, the majority of believers make a decision to follow Christ before finishing high school, making adolescence a critical time of spiritual exploration and discovery. Adolescents need consistent, stable, Christian adults present in their lives for their spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. Research has confirmed that having five adults, outside of parents, who invest in the lives of young people in small, medium, and large ways increases their chances of having a lasting faith and doing better during adolescence.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The problem? One of the frustrations voiced by many youth pastors is the challenge of finding, and perhaps more importantly, retaining volunteers. While there are resources available that address recruiting volunteers, there is far less on retaining volunteers. Meanwhile, a third of volunteers drop out each year, essentially turning over a volunteer team every three years.[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16) With the need for consistent adult presence in adolescent lives, this lack of attention and research in this area misses a critical need of adolescents and student ministry. Adolescents need adults to be consistently present, not a revolving door of adults arriving and moving on shortly after.

### Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to identify factors and practices that influence long-term volunteer engagement and retention in student ministry. The study was guided by the following research questions:

* What are the primary motivating factors that drive long-tenured volunteer engagement in student ministry, defined for the purposes of the study as five years or more?
* How do student ministry structures (e.g., defining clear expectations, a balanced calendar, training, fellowship, appreciation) impact and contribute to long-tenured volunteer commitment and retention in student ministry?
* What are the perceptions and experiences of volunteers themselves regarding the factors that contribute to their long-tenured engagement and retention in student ministry?

In answering these questions, the goal was that realistic and attainable practices and environmental factors could be identified that youth pastors and youth directors could implement in their ministries to foster longevity in volunteers.

### Biblical Theological Themes

The study was rooted in the biblical principle found in Ephesians 4, a direct call to leaders to equip believers for the work of ministry. Youth pastors have a responsibility from God to train others for ministry, not simply do it themselves. Volunteers are not called to simply be bodies in a room meeting liability requirements for the church’s insurance, they are meant to be equipped and given opportunities for meaningful ministry:

***11****So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,****12****to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up****13****until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV)*

Every believer is transformed into a new creation, God’s handiwork, designed to serve God, as Paul describes in Ephesians 2,

*For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10, NIV)*

Youth pastors have the privilege of being a part of that equipping and gifting of ministry, using their pastoral gift to foster the gifts of their volunteers, as Peter describes in 1 Peter 4:

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10, NIV)*

The value of leaders equipping the body is seen throughout the New Testament. In Acts 18, there is a fascinating moment where two leaders, Priscilla and Aquila, heard a man named Apollos teaching. They appreciated his desire to lead but recognized that he needed further equipping, so they pulled him aside to provide needed training. For many, the temptation would be to silence someone trying to teach before they are ready; Priscilla and Aquila instead modeled a better way. They recognized the potential in Apollos and took the time to invest in him.

***24****Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.****25****He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.****26****He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (Acts 18:24-26)*

Most significantly, this principle is modeled throughout the ministry of Jesus. Early on, John records that *“it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.” (John 4:2, NIV)* In the gospels Jesus is described as sending out the disciples to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and drive out demons.[[17]](#footnote-17) His intent was to equip them for ministry and give them practical opportunities to practice those skills before handing the leadership of the church over to them after His resurrection. As Paul commands Timothy to *“discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5, NIV)*, youth pastors today also share this biblical imperative to engage in all of the duties of youth ministry, including equipping volunteers for meaningful service.

### Project Outline, Methodology, and Limitations

The first stage of research involved exploring books, articles, and dissertations that relate to retaining ministry volunteers. Resources were identified through the author’s experience, online searches, and recommendations from experienced ministry workers and pastors. This research shaped the questions to be asked of interviewees and survey participants, as well as informed some potential practices for retaining volunteers.

The second stage of research involved three groups of people directly connected to youth ministry. The first group included 342 youth pastors who took an anonymous survey with questions related to their experience and practices around leading volunteers. The second group of people was comprised of eight long-tenured volunteers that have served in the author’s student ministry. Their length of service ranged from seven years to thirty years. They were interviewed individually about their involvement with questions designed to identify what practices or things have fostered their longevity in student ministry. They are identified in the study and in this paper with the code VOL, followed by the numbers 01-08, assigned to them by the order in which they were interviewed.

The third group included ten youth pastors, two former youth pastors who now serve as volunteers in student ministry and work in student ministry resource companies, one former youth pastor who now serves as coach and pastor to youth pastors, and one former youth pastor who is now the volunteer manager for a large international ministry. These fourteen leaders were interviewed individually with a set of questions designed to identify practices and environmental factors that have contributed to volunteer longevity in their ministries. They are identified in the study and in this paper with the code YP, followed by the numbers 01-14, assigned to them by the order in which they were interviewed.

The limitations of the study were:

* The long-tenured volunteers interviewed are all involved in the same student ministry. Their insights are shaped both by their relationships and experience working with this author in the same specific context.
* The author came into the study with opinions regarding practices and principles that encourage longevity in volunteers based on his 24 years as a youth pastor, and in particular, his 17 years at his current church. This bias impacted research in ways recognized, as noted here, as well as ways not recognized.
* While some of the youth pastors interviewed were not previously known to the author, two-thirds of them had a prior relationship with him. There is a shared style of ministry and background between the author and the youth workers in his different networks that could contribute to confirmation bias.

### Definition of Key Terms

The following gives context and definitions to key terms used in this paper:

* *Adolescence / Adolescents:* While adolescence includes the onset of puberty through the late twenties, when this paper refers to adolescents it will be specifically referring to student ministry age adolescents, or young people in middle school and/or high school.
* *Church:* Unless otherwise specified, “church” will refer to the local church body.
* *Long-Tenured Volunteer:* For this paper, a long-tenured or long-term volunteer will describe a volunteer who has served in student ministry for five or more years.
* *Parent(s):* Unless specified otherwise, this descriptor will refer to parents or guardians of young people in middle school and/or high school.
* *Student Ministry / Youth Ministry:* Refers to ministry focused on adolescents in grades 6 through 12. Churches can vary on where they start their youth ministries, with the occasional church beginning their student ministry at 5th grade, and a large percentage starting their student ministry at 7th grade.
* *Volunteer / Volunteer Leader:* For this paper, this description will refer to any volunteer serving in student ministry.
* *Youth Pastor:* The term Youth Pastor will describe the lead youth ministry worker in a local church whether they are paid or volunteer, whether their title is “youth pastor,” “youth director,” or another title along those lines.

**Conclusions**

Based on the findings of the study, the following pages include conclusions and recommendations for implementing the findings in student ministry. The data from the literature review, survey, and interviews point to six key factors in influencing long-term volunteer engagement and retention. They are *Clarity, Training, Relational Connections, Meaningful Service, Rest,* and *Appreciation*. While some of these are mentioned more than others, (rest, in particular, is rarely mentioned) the data reveals that each plays a critical role in setting volunteers up for longevity.

### The Problem Behind the Problem

As already highlighted, adolescents need consistent, loving adults – in addition to their parents – that are present and involved in their lives throughout their adolescence. The pre-teen and teenage years are a critical time of identify formation and spiritual exploration, a time in which patterns for life are formed. Already identified is the problem of the high rate of turnover in volunteerism, creating a revolving door of adults in student ministries instead of the stable presence young people so desperately need and long for.

This problem is only compounded by the rate of turnover churches see in youth pastors. Of the 342 participants who filled out the anonymous survey for the research study, while only 9.1%, or 31 individuals, have been in ministry for three years or less, 41.5%, or 142 individuals, have been at their current ministry for three years or less. When these numbers are expanded to five years, 60.2%, or 206 individuals, have been at their current ministry for five years or less. These numbers align with Barna’s 2016 *The State of Youth Ministry* research data where they found that 39% of youth pastors had been at their church for three years or less, and 56% had been at their church for five years or less.[[18]](#footnote-18) With these surveys happening almost a decade apart, it would seem to indicate that this is a consistent pattern in youth ministry staffing. One of the obstacles to long-tenured volunteers, defined by this paper as five years or more, is the consistent lack of long-tenured youth pastors over the years. Youth pastors need to model the behavior they want to see in their volunteers, including longevity.

The reasons behind the majority of youth pastors being at their current ministry for five years or less are outside the scope of the study. Even so, both churches and youth pastors should exercise greater caution before separating, because the need of our young people to have consistent adults present throughout their adolescence cannot be forgotten.

This turnover rate in youth pastors does take a toll on volunteer teams. In the survey results for the study, youth pastors who have been at their churches for three years or less were more likely to feel frustrated with the process of finding volunteers than satisfied. 43.2% of those who selected “impossible to have enough volunteers” or “difficult to find enough volunteers” on the question, “How do you feel about recruiting volunteers?”, have been at their current church for three years or less. Conversely, long-tenured youth pastors were more likely to be satisfied with the recruiting process than dissatisfied. For those that selected “satisfied with number of volunteers” or “more than enough volunteers,” 29.2% of them have been at their current ministry for ten years or more.

Having said that, there is room in scripture for a pastor to have a long-term impact in a short period of time. Jesus spent less than three years training and equipping the apostles for long term ministry. The apostle Paul routinely moved on from location to location, leaving behind established leadership. The key is that both were following God’s leading. As YP-02 noted, “Obviously longevity is the goal, but sometimes sports teams sign a veteran to win a championship, right? Sometimes your short-term volunteer takes you from good to great or even to elite, and that’s okay … God might’ve called them to another ministry … sometimes that’s a short season.” While he was speaking of volunteers, this can be true of the youth pastor as well.

Regardless of the youth pastor’s tenure at the church, one of the greatest impacts they can have in the long term is not how many kids they got out for the all-nighter, or how many teens they took on the retreat, rather, it is in the caliber of volunteer team they build, equip, lead together with, and then leave with the student ministry.

### Summary of Key Findings

Through a mixed-methods approach, including a survey of 342 youth pastors, interviews with 14 youth pastors, interviews with 8 long-tenured volunteers, and a review of relevant literature, six factors emerged in varying degrees as important factors in volunteer retention.

Table 1: Summary of Factors identified by Youth Pastor interviewees

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **YOUTH PASTOR** | **CLARITY** | **TRAINING** | **RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS** | **MEANING-FUL SERVICE** | **REST** | **APPRE-CIATION** |
| YP-01 |  |  | X | X |  |  |
| YP-02 |  |  | X |  | X |  |
| YP-03 | X | X | X | X |  |  |
| YP-04 | X | X | X | X |  |  |
| YP-05 | X | X |  |  | X |  |
| YP-06 |  |  | X |  |  |  |
| YP-07 | X |  | X |  |  |  |
| YP-08 |  |  | X |  | X | X |
| YP-09 | X |  | X | X |  | X |
| YP-10 | X | X |  | X |  | X |
| YP-11 |  |  |  | X |  |  |
| YP-12 | X |  | X |  | X |  |
| YP-13 | X |  |  | X |  |  |
| YP-14 |  | X | X | X |  |  |

1. Clarity

Clarity in casting vision, communicating expectations, and clearly defined wins are critical contributors to volunteer satisfaction in ministry. 24.2% of those who described themselves as “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers (question 6 in the survey) mentioned clarity as an important factor in volunteer longevity in their answers to the open-ended question 21 of the survey, “What factors encourage volunteers to remain committed to the youth ministry team long term?” Conversely, only 15% of those who selected “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” with their leadership of volunteers mentioned clarity in question 21, suggesting that clarity does play a role in a youth pastor’s satisfaction with leading volunteers.

Eight of the youth pastors interviewed noted clarity as an important factor in retaining volunteers (see table 1). YP-07 addressed this, saying, “every single leader wants to know how to win and if they're doing good. And so having clear expectations and expectations for leaders [is important].” He goes on to say that volunteers will “last way longer through the crap because they know, ‘even if I don't see results, I know that I'm doing what the ministry is requiring of me.’” YP-03 said that volunteers “need strong leadership that is casting vision for them, helping them be excited about what's coming up in the ministry, [to] not be stagnant, [who] is thinking about their next step in ministry.”

Along those same lines, the volunteers interviewed also noted the importance of clarity. VOL-05 noted, “I think we all as leaders know what’s expected of us. We review that every year in the beginning of the year. We know that you and your staff are always going to support us in anything.” VOL-06 observed, “Communication is always key. I feel like you’re a very good communicator.” She went to describe the upcoming calendar and communication about events as being helpful for her as a volunteer.

Clarity gives volunteers a sense of stability and consistency. Where there is clarity in casting vision, communicating expectations, and clearly defined wins, volunteers feel confident in their understanding of what they need to do and how to interpret their success in student ministry. This stability allows them to feel secure in their role and enjoy their service, setting them up for long-term effectiveness. Clarity also includes being direct in communicating the value and importance of volunteering for the long haul.

1. Training

Volunteer training came up far less in comments on the survey and in the interviews with youth pastors than almost all of the other factors, which was surprising given the volume of resources available for training volunteers. Only 13.5% of youth pastors who indicated they were “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers articulated it as a factor in their answers to question 21 of the survey, while only 10% of those “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” with their leadership of volunteers mentioned it. Additionally, only five of the youth pastor interviewees mentioned it as a factor in retention (see figure 1). However, only 9.1% of respondents to the survey answered that they do not do training with their teams. The largest response was that they offered quarterly and bi-annual training with volunteers, with 52.1% of respondents selecting one of those two options on the survey. While it may not come to mind for most respondents as a factor in longevity, the majority of youth pastors do incorporate training to varying degrees and frequency in their student ministries.



Figure 1: Meeting Frequency for Satisfied & Completely Satisfied Youth Pastors

*Survey Question 14: How often do you have meetings with the volunteer team for training, updates, etc.?*

* None 4.3%, 10 individuals
* Monthly 21.3%, 49 individuals
* Bi-Monthly 6.1%, 14 individuals
* Quarterly 32.2%, 74 individuals
* Bi-Annually 23%, 53 individuals
* Annually 13%, 30 individuals

Research has demonstrated that training and equipping volunteers increases longevity.[[19]](#footnote-19) [[20]](#footnote-20) YP-04 cited Ephesians 4:12 in describing the importance of youth pastors training volunteers, saying that their “job is to equip God's people to do works of ministry … the role of us as youth pastors is not to do the ministry but to equip others to do ministry … we've got to recognize that as youth pastors, [volunteers are] students and [we need to be] equipping them.” YP-10 noted that “most volunteers need some training to figure out how to best serve and connect.” YP-08 noted both the challenge and the importance of “knowing how to individually equip [volunteers] for what they're facing [in student ministry].” VOL-01 noted about the training we do at our church for volunteers, “I think early on when you’re first volunteering, those are important. [They are an opportunity] to not feel alone in asking questions and understanding if other people are going through similar things in their groups.”

Like clarity, training plays a critical role in not just equipping volunteers for student ministry, but also in giving them a sense of preparedness and confidence in their role. These feelings often translate into long term success and a higher probability of remaining in student ministry. Those who answered that they were “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers gave quarterly (32.2%), bi-annually (23%), and monthly (21.3%) as their top answers for how often they have team meetings for training and ministry updates, affirming the importance of training in their satisfaction with their leadership of volunteers (see figure 1 for full results of the answers given by the 230 youth pastors who selected “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers).

1. Relational Connections

Relational connection within the team of leaders and with the youth pastor is an important piece to volunteer retention.[[21]](#footnote-21) [[22]](#footnote-22) [[23]](#footnote-23) Jim Burns notes that “in order to retain volunteers, we must be friends to them.”[[24]](#footnote-24) In addition, one of the main reasons people volunteer is the hope of making new relational connections.[[25]](#footnote-25) Finally, relational connections with the students are deeply meaningful as well. One survey respondent wrote, “I think a genuine love for the students has kept [volunteers] coming back year in and year out.”

Relational Connections was the second highest recognized factor in the survey results and the highest recognized factor identified in interviews with youth pastors. 46% of survey respondents who marked “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers identified relational connections as an important factor in volunteer longevity, while 37.5% of volunteers who marked “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” noted its importance.

YP-03 noted the importance of relationships saying, “Nobody's going to stay on a team for a very long time if you're not great friends together … creating a culture of family, creating a culture of togetherness,” is critical to a volunteer feeling like they belong and are connected. For YP-06, relational connections are the number one reason volunteers have longevity in ministry with him. He noted, “I think relationship is a big deal. Having a rapport with these individuals, they're people I like to do life with, to get together casually, not just for ministry purposes. [That has been] one of the factors that really predicts that a person's going to have longevity with me.”

One of the things that stood out in the interviews with the volunteers was the impact of their relationships with the students and the other volunteers as a driving factor in their longevity. From their perspective, it is because of their love for, and connection with, the students that they keep coming back year after year. VOL-07 described the relationships as “a gift God has given” her. VOL-05 noted, “I think just the friendships that I’ve created with the girls since sixth grade through now has been really rewarding. And I’m hoping and praying that those friendships continue after they graduate.” Regarding the other volunteers, VOL-05 said the “camaraderie, friendship, and the advice and texting and praying for each other” are all meaningful to her.

People are created to be in community, the creation stories of Genesis make that clear. Volunteers stay when they feel a sense of belonging and connection. Student ministries that successfully foster relationships between the volunteers in addition to their relational connections to the students create environments where volunteers thrive and want to stay long-term. It is this author’s belief that it is not a coincidence that 45.2% of those who identified themselves as “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” with their leadership of volunteers answered that they do not create opportunities to fellowship with volunteers outside of student ministry activities.

1. Meaningful Service

Volunteers want to be empowered. When they’re empowered they are content, and when they are content they continue to volunteer.[[26]](#footnote-26) Doug Fields writes that “we see high turnover in youth ministry because many youth workers try to do everything themselves.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Dunn and Senter note that “long-term growth of a youth ministry is directly dependent on the ability of the youth worker to release ministry responsibilities to mature and qualified lay leaders.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Meaningful service refers to service that is significant, carries weight, reflects a level of empowerment and trust in the volunteer from the leadership to serve through the gifting God has given them.

Meaningful service was the top factor given by survey respondents to question 21 in the survey, with 49.3% of “satisfied” and “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers respondents identifying it as a factor, and 57.5% of “dissatisfied” and “completely dissatisfied” respondents identifying it as a factor. While many gave one version of this answer or another to the question, it does make one wonder what they consider to be meaningful service? When comparing answers between the “satisfied/completely satisfied” group and the “unsatisfied/completely unsatisfied” group to question 16 in the survey, “what ways do volunteers serve in your student ministry,” some significant differences appear. Volunteers are almost four times more likely to be an event speaker under a youth pastor who is “satisfied/completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers as opposed to volunteers under an “unsatisfied/completely unsatisfied” youth pastor. Similarly, there is a higher chance they will be a large group speaker, and more than double the chance they will be a service project leader. Perhaps some of the dissatisfaction with their leadership, for those that selected that answer, whether they realize it or not, is their tendency to not give away some of the more visible responsibilities in their ministry?

VOL-03 spoke of the impact of meaningful service in his life, saying, “if I can be there for the kids when they need an adult, then I know I’ve done something worthwhile.” VOL-04 shared, “It seems to me that the biggest determining factor [in longevity] is making a difference and enjoying it … When you make a difference in a young person’s life, it is pretty cool."​ VOL-05 shared ways in which she sees her service as meaningful, “I trust and know that the Lord has a purpose for our time together and that He uses us even though we might not see it all the time. But absolutely, I know that it's meaningful and that it's been impactful in the students' lives.”

One of the universal desires is that of purpose, wanting one’s life to mean something and to make a difference. Volunteers need to know that their service is making a difference. This can happen in a variety of ways, such as through clear vision casting and defined wins, through constant affirmation, and through sharing the spotlight moments – allowing and empowering volunteers to be the speaker, the games leader, the event planner, the service project leader, and so on. It means living out Ephesians 4:12 and equipping the volunteers for the work of the ministry. Volunteers who are empowered with leadership opportunities are allowed to contribute meaningfully, which will result in greater retention on volunteer teams.

1. Rest

Rest refers to breaks in the youth ministry calendar where volunteers are given an opportunity to take a break from their youth ministry responsibilities to rest and recharge. Only a few books addressed this principle, and even then, only briefly. Searcy cautions that “volunteers will burn out” if there are no opportunities to rest.[[29]](#footnote-29) He goes on to write that volunteers “will eventually get tired; part of our job is to make sure they take a break before they do.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The author of this paper particularly appreciated his observation that “muscles grow during the release period, during the time of rest after the stress.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Only 3.3% of the youth pastors who selected “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers identified the need for breaks in the calendar as a factor in volunteer retention. Only 2.5% of the “unsatisfied/completely unsatisfied” respondents identified periods of rest as an important factor. Similarly, 28.6%, or four of the fourteen, youth pastor interviewees identified it as a need. While a higher response rate than the open-ended question in the survey, it was still the second lowest mentioned factor in the interviews (see table 1). Even so, only 12% of survey respondents answered question 17 that their expectation is that volunteers are to serve 50-52 weeks of the year, so it would seem that whether an articulated value or not, many student ministries do incorporate breaks into their calendars.

39.2% of survey respondents answered the multiple-choice question regarding the number of weeks per year volunteers are expected to serve by selecting 40-49 weeks, while 32.5% answered 30-39 weeks. In hindsight, it would have been more revealing to split the 40-49 weeks into two possible answers, 40-44 weeks, and 45-49 weeks, as 49 weeks of the year is still most of the year, while 40 weeks could mean volunteers have the summer off.

All eight of the volunteer interviewees cited breaks as an important part of their longevity in student ministry. VOL-05 said, “I think it’s helpful … absence makes the heart grow fonder,” she also pointed out that it helps prevent burnout. Along the same lines, VOL-03 said, “I think it keeps us from getting burned out.” VOL-08 was the most emphatic, saying, “Oh God, yes. Yes, they’re great. Don’t take them away. I will quit! No, just kidding!” She went on to explain that knowing she has breaks in the calendar makes it more manageable to minister to her small group throughout the week and attend sports events or school plays during the school year.

Having intentional rhythms of rest is key to preventing burnout in volunteers. By being intentional in scheduling the calendar, valuing the time of volunteers and being proactive in protecting seasons of rest for them, youth pastors create a healthy ministry that fosters volunteer longevity.

1. Appreciation

Recognition and acknowledgement cause volunteers to feel valued, which contributes to longer tenure. This was a prominent theme in the literature. At the same time, “central to volunteers abandoning organizations is their *lack of acknowledgment*.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Andy Stanley writes, “Unexpressed gratitude feels like ingratitude to the ones for whom you are grateful.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Research indicates that appreciation and “symbolic rewards” are associated with longer tenure in student ministry.[[34]](#footnote-34) A reoccurring theme in the literature is the idea, “what you celebrate gets repeated.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

34% of the youth pastors who selected “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership of volunteers identified appreciation as a factor in volunteer retention, while only 15% of the “unsatisfied/completely unsatisfied” respondents did so. Interestingly, only three of the youth pastor interviewees listed appreciation as a factor for longevity, but later in the interviews, all of them identified thoughtful ways in which they demonstrate appreciation to their volunteers. Between the survey and the interviews, it became apparent that youth pastors engage in a variety of ways to show appreciation to volunteers. According to the survey, the top way youth pastors show appreciation is through thank you notes and cards, with 80.4% selecting that as a way they show appreciation. A close second was thank you gifts, with 74.9% selecting it, while the third highest selected option was a volunteer appreciation dinner/event with 55.8% of respondents selecting it.

What stood out to the author in the data from the survey and interviews were the responses from the volunteer interviewees. It was expected that they would articulate the ways in which they felt appreciated to include the annual appreciation event, the Christmas party, the cards sent to them, the frequent public praise given to volunteers, and so on. The overwhelming response, however, was that they felt most appreciated when students voiced appreciation, when parents of students voiced appreciation, and when they are entrusted with significant leadership opportunities because it means the leadership believes in them, and they have credibility, as VOL-04 put it. He also noted, “I love and cherish those times,” referring to when students reach out to him, particularly after they graduate from the student ministry. VOL-07 noted how meaningful appreciation from parents of students is to her, saying, “everybody appreciates somebody else loving their kids.”

YP-03’s observation that it’s important “to be a student of the ways that your volunteers receive appreciation” is incredibly important for youth pastors to consider. If the youth pastor realizes that his or her volunteers feel most appreciated when they receive affirmation from students and parents of students, what is he or she doing as their pastor to make sure that need is addressed? Volunteers need to know their service is valued. Expressing gratitude and recognition in personal and meaningful ways is critical to creating a culture that honors volunteers and fosters longevity.

### Implications for Youth Ministry Leaders

Based on the findings of the study, youth pastors must intentionally structure their ministry and leadership in such a way that supports and fosters long-term volunteer engagement. Adolescents increasingly need loving, consistent, Christian adults present in their lives throughout their adolescence in addition to their parents. Student ministries with long-tenured volunteers will be significantly stronger and more effective than those that have constant turnover. Towards that end, youth pastors should consider the following:

*Youth Pastor Development*

One of the things that stood out in looking at the anonymous survey results is the clear need for increased attention on the topic of retention of volunteers and the need for increased training of youth pastors in both the importance of long-tenured volunteers and in the practicalities of creating student ministries that encourage and foster volunteer longevity. Whether respondents had an answer to question 21 was impacted by their satisfaction with the leadership of volunteers, “What factors encourage volunteers to remain committed to the youth ministry team long term?” Only 0.9% of those “satisfied” or “completely satisfied” with their leadership answered that they did not know, while 12.5% of those who were “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” answered that they did not know. 8.3% of those who felt neutral about their leadership of volunteers also put that they did not know. Additionally, 7.9% of all respondents chose not to answer the question at all, implying a lack of confidence in their knowledge regarding volunteer longevity.

It is also worth noting that those who selected “dissatisfied” or “completely dissatisfied” with their leadership of volunteers had a higher percentage of younger youth pastors, a higher percentage of those with less formal education, were more likely to have been in ministry for less time, and were more likely to have been at their church for three years or less. All of this points to the need for more attention and resources on this topic for youth pastors in general, but particularly for those with less experience and less formal education and training.

*Recruitment Practices*

 With 40.7% of all respondents finding it “impossible” or “difficult” to find enough volunteers, it is clear that many youth pastors need to revisit their recruitment practices and timelines (see figure 2). DeVries warns against the tendency of many in youth ministry to be reactive in their recruiting. Trying to find people at the last minute to fill urgent needs is a recipe for setting someone up for a short tenure. DeVries writes, “Frantically cobbling together a group of volunteers who fill slots every other week or so reinforces the perception that they’re only helpers in someone else’s ministry. When we see a youth ministry with rotating helpers, we can be sure that there is dry rot in the foundation.”[[36]](#footnote-36)



Figure 2: Feeling About Recruiting Volunteers

 *Survey Question 12: How do you feel about recruiting volunteers?*

* Impossible to have enough volunteers 5%, 17 individuals
* Difficult to find enough volunteers 35.7%, 122 individuals
* Almost have enough volunteers 31.3%, 107 individuals
* Satisfied with number of volunteers 24%, 82 individuals
* More than enough volunteers 4.1%, 14 individuals

DeVries identifies a six-step proactive process for recruiting volunteers.[[37]](#footnote-37)

1. Start early. Begin the recruiting process six months before the volunteering needs to begin. This eliminates urgency and allows time to find the right volunteer.
2. Identify needs. Take the time to identify all of the volunteer roles needed.
3. Develop your pool. Identify a list of potential recruits. This can be done by asking for recommendations, going over parent lists, and the church directory. DeVries recommends making a list three times longer than the number of volunteers needed.
4. Select a draft pick for each position. Go after the preferred potential volunteers first, even if it feels like a reach.
5. Start smiling and dialing. Begin making phone calls or sending emails to potential recruits inviting them to be a part of the team.
6. When two-thirds of your potential recruits turn you down, return to step four and repeat the process.

YP-04 spoke of the dangers of recruiting out of desperation and without a plan, noting that just trying “to fill gaps” is not “sustainable and healthy.” He noted, “I don’t just need warm bodies. I need people that are equipped and passionate and pastoral … that last minute thing just hijacks the potential for long-term.” There is a wealth of resources available addressing the recruitment process that youth pastors need to take advantage of and learn from to build sustainable leadership that builds a volunteer team ready to serve for the long haul.

*Foster the Six Longevity Factors*

Based on the results of the survey, if a youth pastor is dissatisfied with their leadership of volunteers, it is likely that they are at best only addressing two of the six factors with intentionality, Meaningful Service and Relational Connections. Even those who are satisfied were likely to leave out two of the factors, Training and Rest. However, all six need to be intentionally practiced and fostered to create an environment best suited to seeing longevity in volunteers.

1. Clarity

Develop a clear mission for the student ministry, clear expectations and responsibilities, defined wins, guidelines for interacting with students, and communicate them regularly. Be direct about the desire for longevity in volunteers and the reasons why it is important. Volunteers should have these in writing and be reminded verbally through team meetings and one-on-one interactions. These tools take time initially to develop but pay off in the long run by creating consistency and giving volunteers confidence in their roles and ministries.

1. Training

Ongoing equipping and development is critical for volunteers to last. Not only does it give them the tools they need to be effective, it also communicates trust and value in that they are worth taking the time to invest in. Consistent training opportunities throughout the year, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development pathways keep volunteers engaged.

1. Relational Connections

A big indicator for volunteer retention is their relational connections with other volunteers and the youth pastor. When volunteers feel like they belong they last. Youth pastors need to prioritize a culture that fosters a sense of teamwork and friendship. This can be as informal as casual meetups at coffee shops with some or all of the team to planned Christmas parties and end of the year parties. These times of fellowship without responsibility are invaluable in creating community and longevity.

1. Meaningful Service

Volunteers should be regularly empowered to lead, to grow, and to contribute in meaningful ways to the student ministry. Youth pastors could implement Spotlight Moments, moments when volunteers are invited to step into the spotlight and lead. This can happen through leading a small group, teaching, being part of the decision-making process, leading a large group time, organizing a game, leading a service project, and so on. Youth pastors need to be generous with these Spotlight Moments, regularly giving volunteers the opportunity to shine. If they are given opportunities to stretch and to contribute meaningfully, they will continue to serve.

1. Rest

Youth pastors must implement rhythms of rest for their volunteers rather than waiting for them to say when they need time off. Building breaks in the calendar is a blessing to volunteers, to families, and to the students as the volunteers avoid burnout and remain effective in their roles. These rhythms of rest often come as seasonal breaks but could also be rotational breaks. While rarely addressed, the study and this paper demonstrate the importance of this in volunteer retention.

1. Appreciation

Student ministries and youth pastors that regularly express appreciation in personal and meaningful ways, whether through words, celebrations, gifts, or acts of kindness, cultivate a climate that honors and rewards volunteers for their service. Youth pastors need to take the time to discover how each of their individual volunteers feel most appreciated and find ways to demonstrate meaningful appreciation to them. The most effective practitioners of appreciation make this a regular occurrence throughout the year in their student ministries.

### Final Thoughts

The findings of the study simply reveal the wisdom of God’s word. Ephesians 4:12 calls youth pastors to equip volunteers *“for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”* As mentioned previously in this paper, one of the greatest legacies the leader of a student ministry program can leave a church is a team of volunteers who are invested in the ministry for the long-haul, who are actively present and engaged in the lives of the students throughout their middle school and high school years. By fostering *Clarity, Training, Relational Connections, Meaningful Service, Rest,* and *Appreciation*, youth pastors can create environments where volunteers flourish and the impact of the youth pastor is exponentially higher.

Investing in volunteers is not simply a leadership strategy, it is a biblical mandate. Not only does it set volunteers up for longevity and ministry effectiveness, not only does it provide desperately needed adults in adolescents’ lives, it also creates a powerful support network and team for the youth pastor, setting the youth pastor up for longevity as well. This in turn positions the church to provide adolescents with the stable, consistent, loving faith guidance they need during this critical stage of their lives.

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