

Reimagining (Youth) Ministry: A Summons, Not a Strategy

Leonard Sweet, April 2026

Yesterday I spent a wonderful day with executives from the National Network of Youth Ministries, resourcing them not about tweaking methods or upgrading models, but about recovering a reality. Not a better way to run youth ministry— but a truer vision of what youth ministry is. What emerged was not a list of improvements, but a call to reimagination.

I thought some of you in my Facebook community might be interested in some out-takes and take-aways from my presentations.

I. The Crisis Beneath the Crisis

Youth today are not fleeing the ancient—they are fleeing the adjacent.

They are not rejecting depth. They are rejecting duplication. The world they inhabit is already relentlessly contemporary-algorithmically curated, hyper-relevant, pixel-saturated, and soul-weary.

And what much of the church has offered is more of the same:

- a Christianized version of the culture they're already drowning in.
- Louder music. Hipper leaders Better production.

I call this the "Relevancy Trap."

But a generation drowning in noise is not hungry for better noise.

They are hungry for otherness. For transcendence.

For something that does not smell like the internet.

II. Relevance vs. Reality

The church was never called to be relevant. It was called to be real—in the deepest ontological sense. To make present what is most actual: the living God, the risen Christ, the fire of the Spirit.

Relevance asks:

How do we meet youth where they are?

Reality asks:

How do we take them where they cannot go on their own?

You cannot out-relevant the internet. But you can out-real it.

III. The Battle for Imagination

The imagination is the last frontier— and the first battlefield.

God is not competing for attention— God is calling for imagination.

The world offers youth everything except the one thing they are starving for: a reality larger than themselves.

Discipleship is not downloading information. It is repatterning imagination.

Jesus is not just Savior—He is the Artist of reality.

The Spirit is not a concept—it is combustion.

IV. From Performance to Participation

The future belongs to ministries that trade performance for participation. Programs gather crowds. Presence forms people.

You can entertain a crowd—but you can only disciple a community.

Youth don't need a stage. They need a story to step into.

Don't build a ministry youth can attend—build one they cannot escape becoming part of.

V. From Information to Incarnation

The next revival will not be downloaded—it will be incarnated.

The deepest apologetic is not argument—it is embodied beauty.

You cannot out-argue a story. But you can out-live one.

If they don't belong, they won't believe.

If they don't become, they won't stay.

We are not raising attendees. We are raising apprentices of Jesus.

The Church doesn't need more influencers. It needs more practitioners of with-ness.

VI. The True Aim of Youth Ministry

The Kingdom of God is not an idea to grasp, or something to build—It is a world to enter and a presence to abide in.

Don't just teach students about Jesus—introduce them to His world and His indwelling presence.

We are not keepers of a program. We are keepers of a fire.

My Closing Charge was a Summons: I ended not with strategy—but with summons:

The future of youth ministry will not be won by better content,
but by deeper presence.

Not by louder voices, but by holier imaginations.

Not by keeping young people busy,
but by making them dangerous with the dream of God.

Your church is always one generation away—from extinction.

Your church is always one generation away—from awakening.

The difference is not innovation. Or relevancy.

The difference is incarnation.

The difference is imagination.