

## Engaging Students

The number one goal of student ministry is to cultivate relationships! First and foremost we connect them into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Second, we connect them in relationship to Godly folks who will mentor and disciple them (Ideally their parents). Third, we connect them in relationship to one another to spiritually journey through life together. And fourth, to connect them in relationship to the lost world that others may experience a relationship with God too.

Relationships don't just happen. They take time, effort, and trust. You cannot have relationship without interacting and conversing. Great conversation is all about curiosity and listening. I want to know what you think and feel about something. This especially applies to students who are so starved of real attention and face-to-face interaction. Many of them don't even know how to have a good face-to-face conversation. We must pursue them lovingly if we are going help them cultivate proper relationships with God and others. But it starts with us. As the people of God a little further down the road of spiritual maturity it is on us to take the first step. How do you have a good conversation with students? Four words: Bravery, Curiosity, Listening, and Timing.

**Bravery:** Almost every person I know is scared or at least a little nervous about engaging someone new. It takes bravery to put yourself out there. Go ahead and risk being awkward, embarrassed, or rejected. It's worth the effort! You'll make mistakes and be misread sometimes but more often than not the person will see your heart and appreciate the effort. Remember that students don't really know how to deal properly with face-to-face interactions, especially with adults. Most of their interactions with adults occur because an adult is correcting them on something. Students are naturally defensive and guarded when an adult approaches them. You have to break through this and it may take time but be brave enough to engage. Most students have never had an adult take a genuine interest in their life, opinions, and feelings without correcting them in some way. Don't take it personal if they don't respond very positively at first, this is why they need us to engage, lead, and train them in this. You cannot do that if you don't break the ice. Remember: They are always more scared of you than you are of them.

**Curiosity:** Take a genuine interest in them. Ask tons of questions and ask follow-up questions on their answers. Avoid close-ended questions that only require one word answers because that is all they will give you. Ask open-ended, perception, opinion, and feeling-based questions. Every person on the planet loves to talk about themselves but rarely get a chance to share their heart and life with an adult who is actually interested. Ask them to explain why they like or dislike a certain thing and genuinely try to see and feel what they feel. Pursue their hearts and be completely into what they are saying. Keep asking questions and relate where you can. Don't correct or criticize their thoughts, feelings, or opinions. Compliment with honesty anything you can about what they said even if all you can complement is their openness or way they said something. Affirmation builds trust.

**Listening:** You have heard it said that humans have two ears and one mouth because God intended people to listen twice as much as they talk. I don't know if that's biblical but I believe the principle is very helpful for our interactions with students. If you are talking more than 33% of the time then you are talking way too much and are making the conversation about yourself. Do your best to relate with what they are saying but if you are sharing a story or thought that takes more than 30 seconds to tell then don't share it. Remember their name and use it as often as you can in conversation. Make sure you remember to use their name every time you greet them after that. Nothing speaks more to a student then when they come back a second time and you remember their name. Relate and make connections in your life to what they are saying but keep the focus on them. This may feel like you are affirming their self-centeredness but in fact you are modeling selflessness for them. You are showing them what it looks like to be outward focused and when they feel heard and loved then they are more likely to hear and love others. Body language is huge to listening. Look them in the eyes as much as they allow you to without being weird. Nodding, affirming, physical reaction shows you are engaged in their story. Ask clarifying questions. Do not spend your listening time thinking of the next question or formulating a response. Just listen.

**Timing:** There is a time for everything. Be very considerate and perceptive of their comfort level. Don't jump into the spiritual too fast. If they appear uncomfortable then step back a little, lighten the conversation, or graciously close the conversation.

Be considerate about how you interact with them among their friends. Coolness is everything and you can create a barrier to relationship if your timing isn't right. This is something that you have to kind of feel out through trial and error. Be yourself but study them carefully so as not to create unnecessary barriers. You don't need to accomplish everything in one conversation. Don't be pushy, or unnecessarily weird. They need time to trust you and you need to be okay with that.

An acronym I like to use in my mind when I engage a new student in conversation is S.A.L.T.T.

### **S – School/Family**

- Students spend most of their time at school so there is plenty to talk about there.
- Examples: What school do you go to? How do you like it? What is the best thing about your school? What is the worst thing about it? What is your best subject? What is your worst subject? Do you know \_\_\_\_\_ who goes to your school?
- When it comes to family, never assume parents are married. People aren't offended when you ask if you ask appropriately.
- Examples: Tell me about your family. How many siblings do you have? How well do you get along? Where else have you lived before coming here? What are your siblings involved in? Do you live with both mom and dad? Tell me more about that.

### **A – Activities**

- Everybody has hobbies and interests. And everybody loves to talk about what they are into.
- Examples: What activities are you into at school? What is your favorite aspect of that activity? How long have you been doing that activity? Who do you usually do that with? If I were to start that activity what would be the first thing I would need to get or know? I'm very interested in that but don't know much about it, could you show me how sometime?

### **L – Leisure**

- Pay attention to what they are wearing. Most everything a student is wearing tells something about them.
- Examples: What is your favorite thing to do on Saturday morning? How did you get into that hobby? Tell me a little bit about how that works. What do you spend most of your free time doing? Why is it that you love doing that so much? What do your parents think of that? What do your friends think of that? What were you doing before you came here tonight/this morning? Explain to me how that works. I like your wristband/tshirt/hat/necklace/etc...tell me how you got it or why it is important to you? Is there a story behind that? What is the significance of \_\_\_\_\_?

### **T – Turn the conversation**

- Take the conversation in a spiritual direction always being mindful of where they are and what they are comfortable talking about.
- Examples: Do you have a church that you are a part of? Does your family have any sort of religious background? What do you think of our church? How did you end up coming to this event today? Do you ever think about God? What do you think God wants from you? What are your spiritual beliefs? Do you know for sure you are going to heaven? Do you mind if I explain this whole "Christian" thing to you? May I share with you what the Bible says about religion? Can I show you a few Bible verses to help you understand this Jesus stuff? Tell me about your spiritual beliefs. How is your walk with Jesus going? Where are you struggling right now in your relationship with God? What is really going good in your walk with God? On a scale of 1 to 10 how well do you think you are following Jesus? Explain.
- Be ready to share the gospel. Have a plan ready to go. I use "The Bridge Illustration", the "G.O.S.P.E.L." acronym, and the "Romans Road" just depending on the situation. Sometimes I use a combination of all three. But I always have

something ready to go at any moment. Always have them read the verses directly from scripture and ask them what each verse means. Help them out along the way. Don't belittle them if they struggle and don't assume they know how to find things in the Bible. They are often nervous and afraid to say the wrong thing. Also, these truths may be plain to us but they are spiritually discerned and can only be truly understood with the help of the Holy Spirit so be patient and gracious. Make sure you illustrate in their terms what "sin", "wages", "confess", "death", etc so they grasp it. Avoid churchy words or theological terms. Involve them in the illustrations as much as possible. For example, if you are drawing the bridge illustration then draw them as the person or write their name or something. Use visuals and objects as much as possible to illustrate. Engage all the different learning styles you can as you explain the gospel. When finished ask them if it makes sense. Have them repeat it back to you if necessary. Explain it all over again you need to, the average Christian heard the gospel explained more than 7 times before they "got it." If they seem to "get it" then offer them an opportunity to receive Jesus right then. Make it clear that the magical prayer doesn't save them but their faith in Christ does. Don't pressure them but make the invitation clear. If they need to time to think and pray then give them a timeframe (i.e. "you think and pray about this and I will ask you about it again on Wednesday night."). Remember its God that does the saving not you and your cool sales pitch.

## T – Take

- Stats say that students that have 7 or more spiritually strong adults pouring into their lives at some point during their high school years have an exponentially greater chance of maintaining their faith beyond graduation. So we need to take them to another adult or student when our conversation has stalled. Look for someone they might have something in common with (same school, age, interests, etc.). You may need to prep a few solid people beforehand so they know what you are doing and can engage the person properly.
- Examples: Do you know \_\_\_\_\_? Can I introduce you to my friend \_\_\_\_\_? Very briefly share some of the things you learned from the conversation to help jumpstart it for the new minister. "Hey Timmy, this is my new friend Jamal, I wanted to introduce you to him because he plays basketball too?" Give both people enough information about each other to spark a conversation but make sure you don't say everything so they can actually talk themselves.

Stay in their proximity as long as possible unless they are visibly uncomfortable. Watch their body language to determine how close you stand to them and whether or not you can make appropriate physical contact (high five, handshake, fist bump, pat on the back). Make sure someone has engaged them in the first 90 seconds of their entering the room. They are forming their first impressions and likely will determine whether they will ever come back in the first 2 or 3 minutes. Make sure someone is their "buddy" and is sitting with them and never assume they know what to do at the particular event. Don't treat them like an idiot but make sure they have whatever they need (a bible, the rules for dodgeball, etc). Everyone is so self-conscious and scared in a new group so think through how you would want someone to help you if you were new today. Make sure they are never all alone. Help them network with other solid students and adults that will give them a positive first experience.

Remember the old song based off of John 13:35, "The will know we are Christians by our love." Christianity is more caught than taught so students need to feel the warmth of the gospel through His people before they will open their hearts to the facts and teaching about the gospel.

**Resources** (I believe anyone involved in student ministry should be intimately familiar with all of these resources. Make the time to go through them and I believe you will be a better minister for it.):

- Relationships
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39MUD5BXJSI&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39MUD5BXJSI&feature=player_embedded)
- Examples on how to share the gospel
  - <http://gospeljourney.com/>
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54jPcucSOvE>
  - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5GG2prKnJc>

- <http://wayofthemaster.com/>
- Tough Questions/Bible Study
  - <http://carm.org/>
  - <http://bible.org/>
  - <http://www.iquestions.com/> - I don't agree with absolutely every response but most of it is good and useful
- Free devotionals
  - <http://www.dare2share.org/resources/free/>
  - [http://www.thejantzfamil.com/BreakFree/bible\\_study\\_resources.html](http://www.thejantzfamil.com/BreakFree/bible_study_resources.html) - Pastor Ryan's Website
- Other
  - [http://www.amazon.com/Do-Hard-Things-Rebellion-Expectations/dp/1601421125/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111012&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Do-Hard-Things-Rebellion-Expectations/dp/1601421125/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111012&sr=1-1)
  - [http://www.amazon.com/Five-Love-Languages-Teenagers-New/dp/080247313X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1330110992&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Five-Love-Languages-Teenagers-New/dp/080247313X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1330110992&sr=8-1)
  - [http://www.amazon.com/Teenology-Art-Raising-Great-Teenagers/dp/0764207040/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111046&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Teenology-Art-Raising-Great-Teenagers/dp/0764207040/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111046&sr=1-1)
  - [http://www.amazon.com/Connect-Relationships-World-Isolation-Specialties/dp/0310287774/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111075&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Connect-Relationships-World-Isolation-Specialties/dp/0310287774/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1330111075&sr=1-1)
  - <http://www.homeword.com/>
  - <http://cpyu.org/>