

FINDING PURPOSE AND PRACTICES FOR YOUTH SABBATH SCHOOL

Steve Case, PhD and Hubert Cisneros, DMin

Why We Do What We Do

When it comes to any youth ministry activity, few people even ask, “Why do this?” If pressed, the answer might be personal, specific, or vague, such as: “Because we want to,” or “It seemed like a good idea,” or “We’ve gotta do something.” Rarely does a person ask, “Why are we doing Sabbath School” or “Why are we doing this particular thing for Sabbath School.” But this basic question should be asked; and answered. Table 1 provides a simplified list of the common reasons youth leaders do a program, such as Sabbath School, for young people.

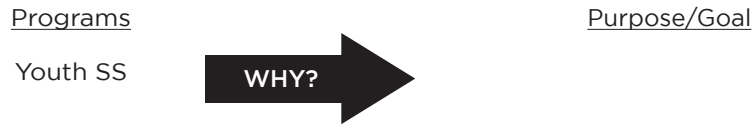
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| 1. Something | Just fill the time that was given. |
| 2. Nothing | We don’t do anything; we do nothing. |
| 3. Anything | Better than doing nothing; do anything. |
| 4. Everything | Super busy, hyperactive, lots of activity. |
| 5. One Thing | Focus on just one thing, like SS or AY. |
| 6. Best Thing | We only do high-quality programs. |
| 7. Same Thing | We’re in a rut, highly predictable. |
| 8. New Thing | We only do the latest; we love fads. |
| 9. Old Thing | It’s what we’ve always done. |
| 10. My Thing | Whatever I want, I don’t need a reason. |

Without a clear purpose for Youth Sabbath School, or any other component of youth ministry, planning becomes either non-existent, pedantic, or an aimless experiment. Lacking a clear purpose, we unconsciously evaluate by attendance (“We had more people than last week”), or how a person feels at the moment (“I liked it”), or level of criticism (“At least nobody complained”). But such statements could be equally true for just about anything—going to the movies or lunch at the cafeteria or getting something on sale at Macy’s. What does this have to do with Youth Sabbath School? Can we identify a purpose or a goal for this weekly gathering? It seems that would be helpful in making a difference when it comes to planning, evaluating, and impacting the lives of young people.

Coming Up With a Purpose

To come up with a purpose for Youth Sabbath School, simply ask the question: “Why?” In other words, “Why are we doing this?” (see figure 1). Your purpose or goal should answer that question.

FIGURE 2
Youth Ministry Programs and Purpose



If you don't have a purpose, it's time to do some brainstorming, and feel free to get input from others. Ideas might include: Go to heaven, have a relationship with Christ, keep youth in the church, or reach the community. Adding these to the previous figure yields figure 2.

FIGURE 2
Youth Ministry Programs and Purpose



Either immediately or over time, some of the purposes will probably be adjusted and improved. Others will fall by the wayside. We suggest the overall purpose of CHRISTLIKENESS.¹ It includes accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord, and that involves broad and unique discipleship by living God's kingdom now as well as in the future. The Bible says: "He [God] knew those who would be His one day, and He chose them beforehand to be *conformed to the image of His Son* so that Jesus would be the firstborn of a new family of believers, all brothers and sisters." (Romans 8:29, The Voice translation; italics supplied) There may be short-term goals that lead to this overall goal, but identifying the big goal enables a person to take sequential steps to move toward that goal.

You can start your plan with the goal and then move to the program called Youth Sabbath School. But instead of asking "Why?" you would ask the question "How?" The program should provide the answer to "How?" (see figure 3). As you move from right to left, ask: "How?"

FIGURE 3
Starting With Your Purpose/Goal

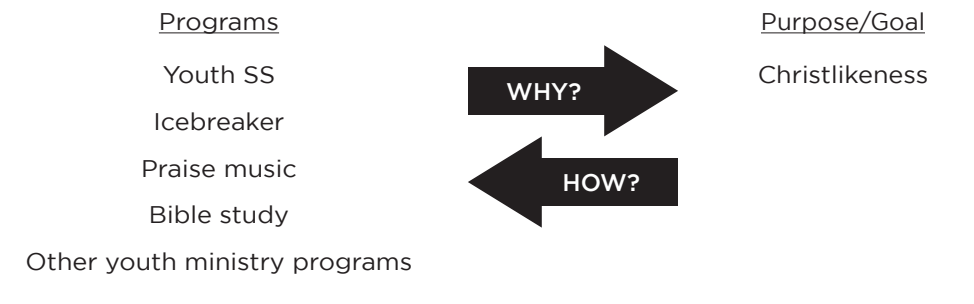


In addition to the entire program called "Youth Sabbath School" you can also take the program components and ask the "Why?" question for each one. For example, why have an icebreaker? Why have praise music? Why do Bible study? The purpose, or a step towards that purpose, should answer that simple

question. If it doesn't, then don't do it. You may need to tweak things so they fit your purpose.

Asking "Why?" should be applied to all programs for young people. A simple planning grid can give your plans the focus they need (see figure 4). Ask "Why?" as you move from left to right, for any program or part of a program. Or you can move from right to left, and ask "How?"

FIGURE 4
The Relationship Between Youth Ministry Programs and Purposes



One more step completes the planning grid. This has to do with your *philosophy* of ministry. Some would label this your values. We suggest a five-part philosophy called "Fostering relationships that build responsible servant leaders." That needs to be unpacked and explained.

"Fostering relationships" forms the foundation of youth ministry and Youth Sabbath School in particular, because Christlikeness is all about a relationship with Jesus Christ and with each other. We want the young people to become Christ-like, so we make sure our Youth Sabbath School has a lot of relationship building elements. Building relationships includes horizontal relationships with others and one's vertical relationship with God.

Another component of the method/philosophy is **"leaders."** A broad understanding of a "leader" is someone whom someone else follows. It doesn't require a large group to empower a leader. In a Youth Sabbath School this means different participants will serve in various capacities rather than one leader running the entire program. It calls for full participation to empower leaders rather than sitting passively as a spectator. For more on leadership, see *Building a Great Team*.

The **"servant"** component of the method/philosophy addresses the common adolescent challenge of self-worth. Service enhances self-worth by going beyond words of affirmation to actions that make a difference. Applying this to Youth Sabbath School, one would expect the youth themselves to find options and opportunities to serve others inside and outside of the church rather than expecting all others to serve them.

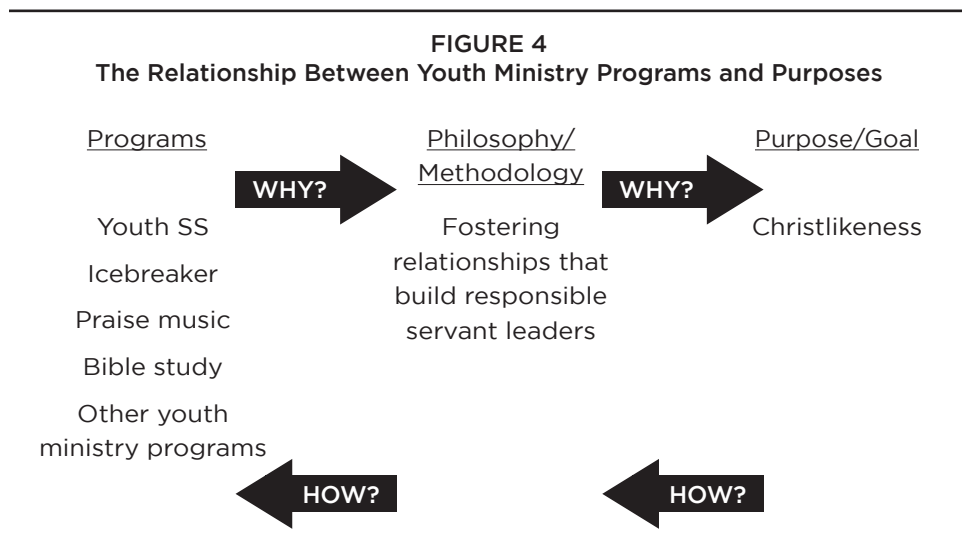
The word **"responsible"** usually resonates more with adults than with young people. Adults want the youth to be "responsible," while teens prefer "freedom." The two are related and can actually be two sides of the same coin. For a person to be responsible, that person must have the freedom to choose; otherwise responsibility is a ruse. Anyone who has freedom also carries the responsibilities of what they choose with the freedom they have. In practical terms, this means the Youth Sabbath School serves as a laboratory for young

people to be given the freedom to choose what will happen during Sabbath School, and then they must follow through to make that happen.

We have almost entirely described the concept: “Fostering Relationships that Build Responsible, Servant Leaders” except for the word **Build.** We think the best way to build young people is to provide a strong relational foundation for security and then move them out of their comfort zones for positive change. Human beings naturally seek to be comfortable, whether that’s something as simple as room temperature or as complicated as avoiding interaction with strangers or people who aren’t already friends. But when things become too comfortable, they end up being predictable and boring. While young children and older adults crave predictability and stability, young people prefer liveliness and something more. Risk-taking, experimentation, and “going for it” characterize young people more than other age groups.

The Bridge Between Programs and Purpose

The philosophy/methodology provides a bridge between the Youth Sabbath School and the purpose/goal of Christlikeness. You can start with the program, Youth Sabbath School, and ask “Why?” The philosophy now answers that question. You can also start on the right side and move to the left, asking, “How?” Take the purpose/goal of Christlikeness and ask “How?” Your philosophy/methodology should answer that question. As you keep moving from right to left, ask “How?” again and your program or what you do in your program should answer that question. If it doesn’t, you need to change something so it will. Figure 5 shows the relationship between youth ministry philosophy and programs and purposes.



While Youth Sabbath School fits under the “Program” portion, any part of youth ministry could be put in this section. Your goal and philosophy will become stable over time. Your programs can and should change, or else they will become neutral/boring. When people ask, “Why are you doing this in youth ministry?” answer with the *purpose* instead of defending the *program*. You can also point out which element(s) of the *philosophy* you are using in that particular program.

Putting It Together

Rarely can a person identify the purpose for a Youth Sabbath School. Without a clearly understood purpose, Youth Sabbath Schools will continue their aimless target. The time slot might be filled, but who really cares? Young people who do attend will go through the motions with low expectations and little or no change. The weekly cycle will turn into a “hit and miss” ministry experience.

In contrast, a Youth Sabbath School with a clear overarching purpose of *Christlikeness* can provide a focus for planning, implementing, and achieving the very thing Christ desires for His followers—to become like him! A philosophy of “Fostering Relationships that Build Responsible, Servant Leaders” explains the methods of doing Youth Sabbath School so that each component answers the “Why?” question. Or you can begin with the overall goal of Christlikeness and ask the question “How?” By implementing the philosophy in each part of the Youth Sabbath School, you can make your youth ministry count.

In the following section, we list a series of concrete recommendations for the various organizational levels of the Adventist Church: Division, Union, Conference and the local church. We hope that as you read these recommendations, you will prayerfully consider moving from reflection to concrete action.

Recommendations

Based on the need for Youth Sabbath Schools to have purpose, we recommend the following:

For Division Youth Directors

1. Make a self-evaluation of what the NAD youth department is doing in terms of its own programs and purpose, and the relationship between them. For example, “Why is Youth Sabbath School part of the NAD Youth Director’s job description?” If it’s not, then the question would be, “Why is Youth Sabbath School not part of the NAD youth director’s job description?” The youth department’s purpose should answer this question. Also, evaluate how the NAD youth department practices the five components of the philosophy/methodology—relationships, leadership, service, responsibility, and non-neutral environments.
2. Identify expectations for union youth directors to report annually their evaluation of their programs and purposes and the relationship between them in measureable terms. In addition, report an evaluation of the five components of the philosophy/methodology the union youth directors follow. The NAD youth department should then follow through with both accountability and affirmation for union youth directors.
3. Establish and implement Youth Sabbath School leadership certification in conjunction with union and conference youth directors. Certification will require a determination of what content is needed, plus the preparation of trainers in order to train others. Resources need to be identified and new resources created. Plans, financial investment, scheduling, and follow through are necessary, starting with the NAD Youth Department. But the local church Youth Sabbath School must be the focus for personnel, training, and resources as NAD networks with unions, conferences, and local churches.

4. Establish a Conference Youth Sabbath School of the Year Award of \$10,000 for one conference each year for five years. This will be based on increasing the percentage of churches with Sabbath School leaders certified through annual youth leadership training, sending monthly reports to their local conference, and whose youth groups are fostering relationships that build responsible servant leaders. Use the money for Sabbath School.

For Union Youth Directors

1. Make Youth Sabbath School part of your job description. Initiate this with your union president. You will have to either let something else go or reduce the percentage you currently invest in some parts of your ministry for a change to occur.
2. Coach the conference youth directors in your union to include Youth Sabbath School as part of their job description. Have them initiate this change with their conference president and be supportive of them in this action.
3. Provide resources and training for conference youth directors to train local church Youth Sabbath School leaders. This should be done in conjunction with the NAD certification.
4. Communicate with the NAD Youth Department on needs you have, the conference youth directors have, and the local church Youth Sabbath School leaders have. Share with NAD the resources local churches have found effective.
5. Establish a Youth Sabbath School of the Year Award of \$5,000 to be awarded once a year for five years. This will be based on the local church Sabbath School leaders becoming certified, sending monthly reports to their local conference, and fostering relationships that build responsible servant leaders in their church's youth ministry. Funds would be restricted to domestic or international outreach projects or mission trips.

For Conference Youth Directors

1. Make Youth Sabbath School part of your job description. Initiate this with your conference president. If you are not going to do this, recruit a "Conference Teen Director" (paid or volunteer) to oversee this and empower them to represent and act on your behalf so Youth Sabbath School receives conference support and action for the local church.
 2. Discover which churches in your conference have a Youth Sabbath School. This will take time, especially if little or no relationship currently exists between you and the local church.
 3. Identify who the Youth Sabbath School leaders are in the churches that have a Youth Sabbath School.
 4. As these contacts with local church Youth Sabbath School leaders are made, listen for feedback on what is happening in the local church Youth Sabbath School, what is not happening, and how the conference youth department can best serve them in their church.
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5. Allocate time to research and respond to the needs expressed.
6. Develop a network of communication in which you are able to share the good news of what others are doing and solicit help and interaction with fellow Youth Sabbath School leaders in the conference.
7. Provide certification training for local church Youth Sabbath School leaders. Two resources already published and available include *A Place to Belong* and *Building a Great Team*.²
8. Prepare to share resources for Youth Sabbath School, and ask what others are using and their evaluation of them. AdventSource carries many youth ministry resources.
9. Establish a Youth Sabbath School of the Year Award of \$1,000 to be awarded once a year for five years. This will be based on the local church Sabbath School leaders becoming certified, sending monthly reports to their local conference, and fostering relationships that build responsible servant leaders. Funds would be restricted to domestic or international outreach projects or mission trips.

For Local Church Youth Sabbath School Leaders

1. Have an overall purpose for your Youth Sabbath School. If you don't have one yet, develop one as described in this paper or in *A Place to Belong*. You can do this by yourself, but it's usually better to do it with a group of those invested in youth ministry (see *Building a Great Team*). Implement the philosophy/methodology so each component of Sabbath School connects with your purpose. Use this for your planning and evaluation.
 2. Connect and share with other Youth Sabbath School leaders from other churches.
 3. Always be training young people to be leaders in various ways in the Youth Sabbath School. Expect them to graduate and continue to serve as spiritual leaders wherever they go, and start training the next individuals that come into the Youth Sabbath School.
 4. Connect with your conference youth director and ask for input. Get certified through the certification process recommended to the NAD Youth Department.
 5. Share with the conference youth director what you're doing and not doing, as well as needs you perceive when it comes to Youth Sabbath School.
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Endnotes

¹ Nevin Harner used this term in 1939 to name the church's objective in educating church members. Klaus Issler used the same term in 2001 to identify the goal to which we educate in the church. In 2014, Steve Case and Hubert Cisneros labeled "Christlikeness" as the broad, overall goal for all youth ministry.

² Both of these resources have six sessions from which a person could choose to provide youth ministry training. These are available from AdventSource.

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