

Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do About It. By Mark Devries. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008. 224 pages. Paperback, \$16.00.

In a flooded market of youth ministry resources designed to give youth pastors a “quick fix”, Devries’ book represents the wise, methodical tortoise that is plodding towards the finish line while the hare is either sprinting madly or taking a nap. There are no magic fixes here, just practical advice on working hard. Slow and steady wins the race. The book itself, however, is far from a slow read but thanks to Devries’ combination of wisdom and personal anecdotes is not only engaging and informative but also gripping.

The purpose of Devries’ book is to promote longevity for those serving in youth ministry, a field with a high turnover rate. Devries identifies common problems and pitfalls that often bring youth ministers to a place of burnout. He then provides the youth pastor with practical systems to incorporate into his or her ministry to bring about what he calls *sustainable* or enduring youth ministry.

There are at least three components that make this book an invaluable contribution to the field. First, the distinction DeVries makes between theology and method in youth ministry; second, his emphasis on creating a competent ministry; and, third, the book’s appeal to an audience beyond the youth pastor.

The Distinction Between Theology and Method

Mark Devries begins *Sustainable Youth Ministry* with a disclaimer: “I’m embarrassed that this book is less about the treasure and more about the clay pots that carry the treasure. This book has grown out of the gaping hole in the competency of youth workers, who may know the treasure well but seem to have little capacity to carry it” (15). This book is for the seminarian who knows what to preach, but not how to communicate. It is for the young youth pastor who knows why it is important to have volunteers, but unsure of how to recruit these volunteers. In

short, this book focuses on the “how” over the “what” and the “why”.

Consequently, Devries’ book embodies a sapiential methodology. He takes the role of a youth ministry sage, drawing upon his eighteen (and counting) years of youth ministry experience to keep us from trying to reinvent the wheel. He is essentially telling us, “Here’s what I’ve done. Here’s what has worked. Here’s where I’ve failed.” Devries does not spend much time explicitly reflecting upon his methodological choices, which more scholarly readers may regret. Rather than an unfolding argument, the book is instead a series of chapters that serve as a competence checklist, a list I explore in the following section.

Devries’ ability to distinguish between the clay pots and the treasure is unusual in this market. Authors often intermingle theology with method, making appropriation of skills and theology more or less problematic depending on the tradition from which one comes. Though one might be able to draw implicit statements of theology from Devries’ book, his focus on the “how-to” is what allows this book to transcend denominational boundaries.

Attention to Competence

Devries’ books will not equip you with the latest PowerPoint backgrounds. Nor will it provide you with “no-prep” games. Rather, Devries straightforwardly looks at what needs to occur in order for responsible, competent youth ministry to take place. His plan does not require a large budget or a widely creative mind, but diligence and follow-through, qualities any eager and willing youth worker can develop.

Devries is the head of Youth Architects, a youth group consulting firm outside of Nashville. This book is an architectural look at youth ministry: rather than looking at youth groups from the ground level, he brings his reader up to what he calls the “balcony” from where the reader is able to get a better perspective on his or her ministry. It is from this balcony that we are able to work **on** our ministries as opposed to merely working **in** them (132). This book therefore discusses systems and structures necessary for a structurally sound youth group. Devries holds the hand of the reader, walking him or her through what a competent, sustainable youth group looks like. These areas of competence include: realistic expectations, leadership development, attention to matters of legality, emotional health, and how to engage in church politics.

Part of the blueprint Devries includes is rich appendices, which alone are worth the cost of the book. Appendix A consists of a series of discussion questions that would spark edifying conversations between youth pastor and head pastor or youth pastor and volunteers. Appendix B provides a checklist of items to be done in order to conduct competent youth ministry (i.e.: develop a youth directory, a twelve-month calendar, etc.) Appendix C consists of a compliance checklist of practical, safety questions such as, “Do you have in writing a brief summary from your church’s insurance agent about what is and is not covered when you are taking a trip away from the church?” (214).

An Audience Beyond the Youth Pastor

Although the words “youth ministry” appear in the book’s title, the potential audience of this book goes beyond the youth pastor. Those teaching youth ministry in academic settings would be hard pressed to find a more illuminating and practical framework for how to do youth ministry. Any pastor of a church with a youth group would be wise to read this book. In so doing she or he would gain a clear vision of what a responsible and competent youth group might look like. Search committees looking for a new youth pastor would do well to pay particular attention to chapters 3 and 7. Chapter 3 rids the reader of any notion of the need for a “superstar” youth pastor—the idea that they must find the one individual that can tap her shoes together and bring the youth group to a new level. This chapter focuses on the dangers of a youth group that is built solely upon the charisma of its leader. Chapter 7 is a self-described “primer” for youth ministry search teams, guiding its readers about where to look for potential youth pastors, questions to ask in the interview process, and how to build an appealing salary package.

My perhaps unusually hearty review of Devries’ latest book is supported by the enthusiastic endorsement given it by the group of youth pastors and educators with whom I meet regularly to discuss the latest youth ministry books. Devries may be embarrassed that he is presenting a mere jar of clay, but that in itself is a true treasure for the youth ministry community.

Amanda Drury
Princeton Theological Seminary