

Thriving rather than just surviving in youth ministry | Blue Bradley



Youth and Young Adult Ministry can be incredibly demanding, and as a result burnout is all too common for leaders. Drawing from years of personal experience Blue will focus on how to create good habits that will keep you on track for the long haul.

Blue Bradley is Director of the Baptist Easter Camp at Mystery Creek, an annual camp that attracts over 4,500 young people. In order for camp to run smoothly leaders and volunteers need to be at their best. Part of Blue's role is to help leaders take good care of themselves.

I found Blue's session really helpful. He shared his ministry as a servant of God, constantly reminding us that ministry is not about you, it's about the young people.

Early on in the session Blue's words "don't take yourself too seriously" woke me up. The ACYM team had been busy organising the Conference. Had we lost sight of the reasons behind organising the Conference? Blue reminded us that "you are anointed for this".

It's not about me was a recurring theme in Blue's session. He continued ... Some of the best leaders that I have seen are recognised because they give their leadership away. Each of us has a very limited capacity. All of the gifts given to you are given so that you can build others up. The servant model of leadership is everything. Don't take leadership too seriously. Leadership is a serious thing but don't let it define you. Recognise your gifts, do what you do well. Know where it is you are called to serve. When you listen to all the voices in your head be sure that you are trusting in God to speak well to us.

In his role as Director of the Baptist Easter Camp Blue has 800 volunteers. The work of the camp is God's work. Blue steps into this. He leads through this. There are times that he has felt that God is speaking to and through him. But right throughout the camp he repeats his mantra: it's not about you. It's not about you. As you move up the leadership chain it is easy for your ego to go somewhere it shouldn't.

Know that it is right to step into God's work. Your mana and your leadership equip you to do this. We step into that gap, that moment. It's very hard for God to do everything. When we are young we are told what to do. We do what we are told when we are three. There is something really wrong when a 30 year old is acting like a three year old. God wants us to understand how to use those gifts He gave us so that we can step into him co-creating with us

Understanding who we are is massive when we think about leadership. If you don't understand how God has created you, you will always see leadership as something for somebody else. We all have different priorities. These are influenced by our experience of the world, culture, politics. We are all different, some are systems people, others are thinking people etc. None are wrong. We need to understand that – don't spend time putting down the views and experience/priorities of others.

Ephesians 4:11: So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 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. We need all five speaking. Many of you will be familiar with Myers Brigg. 80% of engineers and pastors are ISTJ.

Blue does a lot of strength coaching with leaders helping them define who they are and what they have to offer. Thriving starts with understanding with who you are in order to know what you have to offer. He encouraged us to use our intuition ... ask yourself "what does your gut say?" That's the best way that I can serve 5 people or that's the best way that I can lead a camp of 5000 people. If I was to try and organise the camp the way my friend does it wouldn't work. My friend is very organised. If he had to run camp my way then it wouldn't work.

Blue recommended the Book Humilitas – by Dickens (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVJc_NATuTU). He talked about what it takes to be a leader. Are you a leader because of what you have or because of the title you hold? Are you in a mindset of saying "I am the leader, therefore you listen to me."

Dickens talks about the principles of leadership. Leadership comes through influence. We heard about the upside down kingdom of God. The sacrifice. About how the poor will inherit the kingdom of God. People who show leadership by influence or leadership by example are much more powerful than people who lead through position and title:

- Consider how Ghandi galvanised a nation
- Think how one person ... Mother Teresa ... inspired so much
- Consider how Jesus did not take his position as a title, rather he used his influence of a life like this in order to lead.

Blue really encouraged us to identify the things that we are very good at. The next step is to meet God in a place that allows us to be great at these things. Allow God to step in. Shift your paradigm from I am a youth leader to a I am a servant of God. It's NOT about YOU.

Blue dropped out of school at age fifteen. Now looking back he appreciates that older people saw something in him and that they starting pulling that something out. Not to define who I was. I wanted to be a child of God and out of that passion God is a voice through me – we all have that voice. Did I plan when I was 16 that I would still be in youth ministry when I was 26, 36, 46? No.

Youth leaders are some of the most creative beings on the planet. How interesting are you really? Youth Ministers are supposed to be fun – a little bit zany, a little bit quirky. If you can't bring it in some way... you are boring. Lazy boring youth workers lead boring programmes. We can't compete with X-Box. Now's it's different.

It is relationship. It is having pivotal things that you can offer to the youth group. Our ministry takes young people from who they are to who they are becoming. Creating programs that are engaging and fun – not only do you need to have a life, you need to understand where you are taking them. It's about keeping your young people in mind when you are creating programs. They have no idea what they are doing – they just show up week after week. Do you know what you are trying to do? Do you have a job contract? No. People inherit systems and structures.

Unsupervised youth workers have no idea what they are doing. It is important that those older guys saw something in me. Mentorship is critical: someone that you meet with who is older and wiser than you someone who asks good questions about what is going on in your life. Someone who can mirror back to you – who you are. It is really tough being in youth ministry without having someone reflecting back to you.

Questions:

Question 1: Earlier in your presentation you were talking about the Easter Camp and how you lead it one way but others in your team work in quite different ways. How do you keep everyone focused and working towards the same goal?

There is nothing miraculous about like-minded people working together. One heart ... we all talk the same. What they are saying is that we are all in this together. Somehow they have to work out who did what. If everybody is saying the same thing then either you are good at brainwashing or you are very good at passing on vision. How does one person pass this on?

- o It's about purpose
- o It's about understanding each other and listening to what is in the heart of the other person rather than assuming you already know
- o Are you prepared to talk about the elephant in the room. You can only do this by calling the elephant by name.
- o Youth leaders are brilliant at having a wider understanding a wider perspective. One of the things that I did when I came to camp was I asked them "Why are you here?" The heartbeat, the intentionality about what that person's intent was ... this is how you can galvanise somebody who is so different to you. At the end of the day if you don't know why you are there then you are treading water.

Question 2

Deal with your stuff. The higher in leadership you attain for whatever reason the struggles that you have, the more holy I get. I live in the experiences of seeing the devastation that things not dealt with internally are lived out to others. I am living now seeing broken marriages continuously for example.

- As well as knowing your gifts, you also need to know your weaknesses. Pay attention to the stuff you need to deal with and get help with that if you need to.
- The more you work with young people the more you are a role model, and the worse it is if you muck up in your own life. Take hard work. The workload at camp was half-killing me. Through life and leadership – anything like this is going to stick. Remember it's not about you – give it away, give it away, give it away.
- Leading up to camp I have a bit of a rhythm... I need to do some yards beforehand. Need to do some exercise so I start working out before camp so that I am physically fit. Pastoral ministry is one of the most unfit ministries in the world.
- o Transforming mission. We spend an enormous amount of time, working on the computer- you become unfit. There's a lot of stomach out there! It's just that being in leadership is tough – where do you get the time to work out. You have to last the distance. My diet changes. I stop drinking fizzy drinks. I don't drink alcohol. That leaves me with water, juice and coffee. I want my mind to be sharp at camp but really I need my coffee.
- o Spiritual rhythms and practices – how do I pay attention to how God is shaping his intentions in where we are going? It doesn't matter how you do this. For some it is prayer and for others it is going for a walk ... this incorporates your time with God with exercise.
- o Sleep is fundamental. I was blown away. I cannot hear God clearly when I can't sleep. How can I be available to God if I haven't had sleep?

- o When the rubber does hit the road. By the end of camp last year I was toast. I hit a wall. I got an acute taste of it on Monday. It is like a pastor who has preached really well on a Sunday. A friend said I am going to follow you around and pick up the pieces. It was a beautiful camp. Encourage grace and humility in your leadership.
- o I was on stage, my head was going to the problems. I missed the key thing that I was given the mantle to do – spreading the reign of God. I got off the stage and said I will never miss this again because I am too busy to do the things that I think need to be done.
- o With our teams you make the decision because you are in a role. Listening to the voice. You don't have to tackle everything – you don't have to be the one who is making the calls. Part of the art of leadership is letting others fall over and catching them. It's not about me is a great mantra.

Question 3: How do you stay fit for ministry?

Why did you get into youth ministry? There was most likely a kid that pulled you in – someone who inspired you and you wanted to help them, somebody who wanted to commit suicide and who survived. You went to a leadership training course, reading books, you got a certificate and then a degree and then you become a professional. You've got books like this that you need to read. You are learning how to be a professional. You created professional boundaries and then that meant that youth don't receive so much informal contact with you. Now I am qualified I have much more to give to you. Actually now I'm a professional so I don't have time to do bus trips or drive the young people home. What happens over a period of time – the person that you fell in love with – becomes distanced from you.

There are some good boundaries. If you want to get married you need to spend time with girls. If you want to be a leader you need to spend time with young people – as well as growing more, learning more transforming more. After 10 years of that, we see a problem coming up. There is no solution here – keep a soft heart. Always volunteer – don't become a professional in a way that you don't volunteer somewhere, someway. I make myself available to drive. I want to pour into the leadership of churches. Even for me there is a tension that I have to hold I want to become the professional that doesn't separate themselves from the youth worker. Keeping a tender heart – that which first inspired you to ministry.

Question 4: How do you facilitate to help others to find themselves?

We used to work an hour before the meeting began. Half an hour of that time was – how are we feeling as leaders – holding up 10 fingers if we felt really close to Jesus right now or 1 or 2 fingers if "life sucks". Doesn't matter where you are it is about getting the 10s to carry the people who are sitting on 1 or 2 that day.

Eneagram is a wonderful tool. We have the Identity Project which talks about the tools and processes you can get to know yourself. Do both of these in a team.

There is not one tool out there. Who do your friends say you are? What are the aha moments in your life? It starts in the form of who you are and if you do this in a team you will grow together. Back in the day me and Bishop Duckworth used to go hammer and tongs. When you are in your 20s you argue. When you get older you start pulling stuff out of each other. Often the blood is on battlefields because there are no mentors.