

SPiritual ORPHANS

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SPIRITUAL ORPHANS

Teenagers are an easily identifiable--yet difficult to define--group of pseudo-adults. They are no longer children, yet they are not quite adults. Much is expected from them, yet not much is expected of them.

For about a decade, they are striving to define who they are as individuals, what they believe in, where they belong in society, what they are going to do "when they grow up," which friends they should be making, what they should wear, which topics they should focus on in school, and so on. And all of this is going on while their bodies, brains, and hormones are shifting into overdrive!

Some seem to handle it with all the grace and ease of a dancer, while others seem to handle it with the grace and ease of a mountain troll.

To add to the fun, they begin to pull away from their families and start seeking to define themselves apart from the family. They may even attempt to completely isolate themselves from their families--cutting them off physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

The kids in our youth groups are no different. In fact, in their case, you can add to the mix their trying to determine if the faith they have grown up in is really "their own" or if it is their mom and dad's faith that has been pressed upon them.

Now add to that group an emerging generation of teenagers that have not grown up in the Church and have no sense of what it means to be a Christ-follower. These kids are invited to "Emerge," "The Basement," or "Power Hour" by their friends, with no concept of what to expect or what is expected of them.

We all know these kids.

THEY COME TO OUR GROUP HUNGRY FOR SOMETHING BUT ARE UNSURE OF WHAT THAT IS.

They don't quite know where they fit or even if they fit into our environment. They are usually just dropped off by their parents or come with friends. And more than likely, you have never even met their parents.

These kids are essentially spiritual orphans. There may not be a Christian influence at home, so these kids are missing godly influence in their lives and are hungry for it, whether they know it or not.

Spiritual orphans are the skittish, shy ones that you spend months trying to pull out of their shells; they are also the loudmouths that are there every time the doors are open. One thing is absolutely certain about all of them: they are *hungry*.

I consider myself somewhat of an expert on the matter, because I was one of these spiritual orphans. I came from a Christian home that went through some tough times (which can happen when you blend two families). We grew up in the Church, and when we were old enough, we went to youth group. Without knowing it at the time, I was searching for a place where I fit and where I could be something other than a member of my peculiar family. Thankfully, that “elsewhere” turned out to be my youth group.

There was always something going on at Church, and I wanted to be there because I did not want to be at home. And I definitely fit into that second type of kid: the loud-mouth that was always around.

*IT WAS AT YOUTH GROUP THAT I FOUND ACCEPTANCE, PEACE, FUN,
AND A VERY DIFFERENT TYPE OF LOVE THAN THE LOVE OF MY FAMILY.*

This love came in the form of families that welcomed me into their lives, not just their homes. I got to be a part of their everyday lives and see how very differently people lived from my family. These families were pivotal in teaching me about the Bible, how to have healthy relationships between siblings, how to stand up for what you believe in, and that being a Christian did not necessarily mean that you were a nerd.

Please do not hear what I am not saying. My parents were not bad parents, and my siblings were not bad people. But as the middle child, I felt lost in the shuffle of my brothers and sisters. So much was going on at home with our blended family, that I did not know where I fit. But for a time, my adoptive families were where I fit. In a manner of speaking, they were my spiritual foster parents. In no way did they replace my parents, and in no way did they even try to replace them. They simply chose to invest in my life and welcomed me into theirs for as long as I would let them.

By living out the Bible to me, they demonstrated obedience to God and to His Word.

In the book of James, we are exhorted to “do what [the Word] says” and to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1).

Jesus’ own heart for children was apparent when He said to His disciples, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me,” and “Let the little children come to me” (Matthew 9:37, 10:14).

In the Old Testament, Moses admonished the Israelites to teach their children about God as they were living out their lives: “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 11:18–19).

Orphans were specifically addressed in Israelite law so that they would not be overlooked. Because—let’s face it—it is easy to overlook someone who is not in our immediate sphere of concern. If they are not in the forefront of our conscious thought, then we do not even consider them. But this is the point Moses, James, and Jesus were trying to make! The orphans in our midst are just as important as the rest of our “kids.” In some cases, probably more so.

Spiritual orphans have no spiritual compass to follow; they are easily swayed by the world and what it has to offer them. Devoid of strong spiritual leadership, they are forced to figure out life on their own. Many are attention-starved and require extra doses of it. They need unconditional acceptance but with firm boundaries.

This is where we, as the youth leaders, come in. Our job is to demonstrate the Church as a family, not like a family. Family sticks together, no matter what! Family plays together. Family loves each other. Family is a team of people doing life together and watching out for each other. Family sees all of our flaws and loves us because of--and despite--them. Family does life together. This is the Church. This is your youth group. You are a family--a team. You have to watch out for one another and take care of each other.

I know what you are thinking: "Okay, whoa whoa whoa. That is so much more than I signed up for! What do I do? I already have to beg to get people to make brownies for Wednesday night.

How am I going to get them to commit to being spiritual parents?!"

So glad you asked!

Follow the examples of my own spiritual influences and some feedback from fellow youth leaders.

DON'T TRY TO REINVENT THE WHEEL.

HERE'S WHAT YOU DO:

1. Get on your knees, friend!

Get alone and speak with your Lord and Savior, the love of your life, and have a heart-to-heart with Him. He loves you, and He knows how much you love your students. Spend time lifting each and every one of them up to Him. Then lift up the ones who may step only a toe in your door. Ask Him for wisdom in directing your group and thank Him for blessing you with the privilege of what you get to do. Then ask Him to bring the right people to your group that can propel your students to the next level in their walk with Christ. *(Okay, this is a BIG one, but it is actually the most important thing you will ever do for your ministry, your students, your Church, and your own family!)*

2. Start putting out "feelers" with leaders that you trust in your Church.

Ask them to keep an eye open for people who truly have a heart for ministry but are not quite sure where to plug in. These people will have a natural inclination for service or hospitality and will go the extra mile to make people feel welcome.

3. Invite them to dinner. Don't be coy; let them know that you want to discuss ministry options. You do not want to start a relationship with someone by ninja-ing them into youth ministry.

When you get to dinner, get to know them! This means asking questions and then shutting up. Get to know who their family is, how they ended up in your Church, what their passions are, where they feel God leading them to serve, etc.

Okay, now you get to talk. Share with them your passion for teenagers and cast the vision of your youth ministry. Express the need for people to come alongside you in the journey!

Lastly, based on your gauge of their leanings and reaction to your passion, ask them to prayerfully consider coming alongside you and becoming a part of your team. This does not have to be a lifetime commitment, but it is a commitment to minister to teens.

4. This is actually a toughie: Be okay with “no,” but have a plan ready for “yes!” They need to know that “no” is an okay answer, but you are excited about what they have to offer your students.

5. Finally, implement your plan to integrate them into activities that they are passionate about within the youth ministry. Whatever area they choose to focus on, they should always be mindful that you want them to be intentional about getting to know the students. Plug them into an existing small group and encourage them to participate as much as they can without dominating the students. Once they are integrated into youth ministry, they will begin to easily identify needs among the students. Because you have already prepared/trained them (and because of their natural inclinations), they will begin to “be a family” with them.

Again, I know what you are thinking: “What in the world do I teach them? How do I train someone to spiritually mentor a spiritual orphan?!” Some of you might even be thinking, “I’m not even a parent myself!”

Okay, breathe and relax. Most people that reach this point in the process are already motivated to engage your students and are just looking for the license and the road map for the journey. Thankfully, your only role in this is to be like AAA: you give them the tools, and they make the trip their own.

So where do they go from here? It's simple. Give them this “map” (filled out with your Church's information) and your cell phone number. Promise to lift them up in prayer and assure them that you will be available whenever they need you. Then sit back and watch them shine!

Okay, you have done the legwork. You have identified and recruited a stellar couple or person that is committed to investing in your students; you have equipped them to the best of your ability; and you have incorporated them into youth group activities.

NOW WHAT?

Now you get on your knees again and thank God for sending these people into your life and ministry. And then ask Him for more like them! It really is okay to ask. Just be sure to give HIM the glory and remember that He is in control of all things.

Friend, this is so crucial to everything we do: remember that God is in control. Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, is in control. And He cares about you. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose...What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:28,31,32)

WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THIS MINISTRY.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

And if *you* are not alone, then your spiritual orphans should not be alone. They need Jesus just like the rest of us do. By reaching out to them and investing in them, you are giving them a chance to have a heart transformation that can change the course of their lives by teaching them how to develop godly relationships, be a positive influence in their families, develop healthy marriages in the future, and desire to follow God and fall head-over-heels in love with Him.

All of this can happen because time was invested in them. Someone made the choice to walk alongside them and did not allow them to figure out life alone and apart from God. Someone partnered with their parents and showed love to their parents (and showed the teenager how to love their parents).

This is a lofty goal, my friend, but it is most certainly a worthy one. And trust me, as a former spiritual orphan--the returns are ENORMOUS.

HE CARES ABOUT THE MEGA YOUTH MINISTRY AS WELL AS
THE YOUTH MINISTRY THAT ROCKS OUT FIVE FAITHFUL KIDS
THAT SHOW UP EVERY WEEK.