

Churches & Young Life in Small Towns

If you have worked in Small Town Young Life for more than a month or 2 then you most likely found yourself thinking, “The church just sees Young Life as a threat” or “The church is doing youth ministry wrong” or maybe even “What is the point of working with churches when they do not want to work with us?” Whether you are a faithful church attender (which I hope you are) or even a former pastor, if we are honest with ourselves, we must start by admitting this: we get frustrated with the local churches.

But in all fairness, the churches have reasons for their frustration with us as well. We are not perfect, nor is our ministry. Yes, we have become experts in relational ministry, but we have our weaknesses and imperfections just like any given church.

The truth is, “Young Life is not the church; it is an expression of the church in mission” (quote from Bob Mitchell). What that means is that we are not youth pastors; we are missionary mentors. Furthermore, we are missionary mentors in the business of building teams of missionary mentors from the local churches. Teams that are willing to sacrifice countless hours walking in the world of teens sharing with them and telling them about Jesus.

We cannot build teams without the help of the church. To do this, we must spend contact hours with senior pastors of our local churches along with other church leaders. It means we must understand where the church is coming from and why they have concerns about Young Life. We must approach the church with a posture of humility and a sincere desire to work with as many churches as we can.

In those churches are people of different ages, races, and backgrounds, who are learning to follow Jesus. When the kids we live among start to follow Jesus, it is in those churches with those people where their faith will grow.

At this point, you may or may not fully agree, but please hear this: In a small town, the conflict that can arise unnecessarily between Young Life and the church is even more prominent than in more populated areas. In small towns, any one group of people going to one church can have the ability to “run Young Life out of town.” When tensions arise, and they will, it is our genuine efforts to build healthy relationships with church leadership that will put us in a position to make peace and avoid war.

Practically speaking, we need to be attending one of these churches, and meeting with pastors regularly from as many of them as we can. We need to have a diversity of church representation on our committees and our volunteer leadership teams. We need to be celebrating with churches regularly what God is doing. We need to be inviting these churches to join in the ministry and teaching them that we are truly local missionaries. Our mission field happens to be the local high school and middle school. We also need to be learning from these churches, finding community, and growing in our own faith and theology.

Building these bridges with local churches will not always be easy. It is often easier to judge and pick out what the other is doing wrong. However, building these bridges is one of our highest callings in the ministry. If we ignore the fact that God uses the local church, and we are simply a part of these churches, then Young Life has no business existing as a ministry. Let us continue to make Young Life a ministry blessed by God; a ministry God will use to fill our churches with teens who have come to know Jesus.