

ASHLAND

s t u d e n t s

Fall/Winter 2024 Important Dates

Equipped Students: Wednesdays at 6:30pm from 8/28-10/2

Field Day: Wednesday, October 9th

Top Golf: Tuesday, November 5th

Fall Bonfire: Wednesday, November 13th

Widow and Widower Banquet: Monday, December 2nd

Student Christmas Party: Wednesday, December 11th

Ashland Community Church Philosophy of Student Ministry

Introduction

Student ministry is war. Each and every day battles are being won or lost in the overall war for the souls of teenagers. Timothy Paul Jones describes this war within the context of the cosmic war that has been raging since the beginning of history:

This is war because the same serpentine dragon in that celestial conflict that John glimpsed on Patmos who longed to consume the fruit of Mary's womb also wants to devour my children (Rev. 12:1-9). His weapons in this conflict are neither the priests of Molech nor the soldiers of Herod (Jer. 32:35-36; Matt. 2:16). The Enemy's weapons in my child's life are slickly promoted celebrities and commercials that subtly but surely corrode her soul. What we wrestle against in this battle is not "flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).¹

¹ Timothy Paul Jones, *Family Ministry Field Guide* (Wesleyan Publishing House, 2011), 23-24.

The wreckage from this war on adolescents is all around us. A 2007 study from LifeWay Research revealed that “more than two-thirds of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.”² Many of these students never return. Satan wants our children, and he has a good rate of success.

Before launching into Ashland’s philosophy of student ministry—our battle plan—it is vital that we recognize what is at stake. The acknowledgement of real warfare and a real enemy that really desires to eternally harm our children necessitates dependence upon our sovereign Lord and Savior and what he has revealed. Strategies and human planning alone will not win this war. It is a cosmic war and it requires cosmic intervention. We can proceed with confidence, however, knowing that the overall war has already been won by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this current period of history when God’s people await his return, we must acknowledge that the Victor of the war owns the blueprint for successful battle. Christ is our Captain and he has graciously spoken his orders to us in the form of his inerrant revelation, the Bible. The Church has everything she needs to win the war for the souls of teenagers.

If we are trusting God’s Word as our blueprint for battle, we must allow God’s Word to define success in student ministry. Success does not necessarily look like the largest youth group in town, although obviously the more students reached the better. Success also does not equate to fun, although fun is a good gift of God. There have been a lot of student ministries who have filled a lot of rooms with a lot of students and had a lot of fun, that have fallen woefully short of success as defined by Christ. Success is found in student ministry when lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ are made through the cooperative efforts of families and the local church. Our goal is to make as many lifelong disciples as God will allow while relying on the God-given weapons of the gospel of Jesus Christ, sacrificial investment in the lives of students, and prayer.

We do not present this battle plan as the exclusive way to do student ministry. We acknowledge that we are still learning and developing new ideas at the intersection of God’s revelation and our cultural situation. We are simply presenting what we have found to conform most to Christ-centered student ministry within our local church context.

Our Vision

² Accessed on 1/20/14 from <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>.

Ashland's vision statement reads, "We exist to treasure and spread a passion for the supremacy of Christ in all things for the joy of all peoples." Our student ministry gladly shares this vision and adopts it as our own. Since Jesus Christ is the focal point of all human existence and history (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16), he must be the supreme focus of our lives as Christians and our life together as a church (Col. 1:18). The way we honor Christ and magnify his supreme Kingdom authority in our lives is by obedience to his Great Commission to preach the good news to every tribe, tongue, and nation (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Rev. 5:9; 7:9). The advance of the Kingdom of Christ through the redemption of his people from the kingdom of darkness is the storyline of Scripture from beginning to end (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 11:15).

In an age when many student ministries take on their own identities apart from the church, we believe biblical faithfulness mandates our joyful participation within the overall church body, helping the church to accomplish its mission. When students only exist within a peer bubble at church they never acclimate to authentic life as part of Christ's bride. As long as church is primarily fun and games with some teaching mixed in, students will never truly experience community life. They need to be around older believers who are shedding blood, sweat, and tears in this cosmic war. They need to see grown men repent and young wives struggling with the daily pressure of home life. They need to see couples fighting to keep their marital vows and elderly saints living by resurrection hope in the midst of tragedy. We are harming them if we shield them from real church life in an effort to provide entertainment.

We need to take this vision for the church and apply it more narrowly to student ministry. Our student ministry vision statement, which purposefully echoes Ashland's overall vision statement, reads, "Ashland Student Ministry exists to champion the supremacy of Christ by raising up a generation of gospel-committed students through the cooperative efforts of families and the local church." The supremacy of Christ in all things is still our goal, but we will accomplish this goal specifically by discipling students through the powerful partnership of families and the local church. Instead of competing with one another, the family and the church must work in unison in this task. The family must never view the church as primarily responsible for the spiritual health of their children. Discipleship is not a task that can be delegated by families to "professional" ministers. However, the family must also realize that they are not in this alone. The church is here to equip them, support them, and work alongside them in raising their children toward lifelong gospel commitment. Equally important to the task of discipling students who are already within the church is the task of reaching students who are outside of the church. The church and the Christian family must partner to reach these students as well.

Our Unique Convictions

Every church and every ministry has convictions that direct their ministry efforts. “Convictions are not merely beliefs we hold; they are those beliefs that *hold us* in their grip.”³ A conviction is something that drives us. We do not compromise our convictions, because we are thoroughly convinced that they are the commands of God. Some of our convictions about student ministry may not sound unique, and others gain entirely new meaning through proper articulation. Regardless, we believe that these convictions drive our ministry and provide the genome of our ministry’s DNA.

High View of the Gospel. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17). The Bible never fails to remind us who sits at the center of the story. All of God’s promises find their fulfillment in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). In his face we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:6). A truly Christian ministry must be focused on Christ and the gospel as the very center of everything. This conviction is our chief conviction and from which all other convictions flow. This means that Jesus and the gospel must never be pushed to the margins in favor of a particular ministry philosophy or doctrine. When this shift happens Jesus is removed from the center and relegated to a supporting role within the church. The church must constantly remind its members that “it’s not enough to be theo-centric. It’s not enough just to have a high view of God in general. The glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.”⁴ Therefore, our ministry strives to be thoroughly “gospel-centered.”

“Gospel-centered” has become something of a fad in current literature. The phrase is used so often that it’s meaning has become difficult to pin down. Pastor Jeremy Haskins warns of an approach to gospel-centeredness that merely seeks to “tack on the gospel,” opting instead for an approach that imbeds the gospel within the church’s very culture.⁵ A gospel culture means, at the very least, that the person and work of Jesus Christ must be central to everything we do as a church. Our goal in ministry is never mere morality. We

³ Albert Mohler, *The Conviction to Lead* (Bethany House, 2012), 21.

⁴ This quote is from a sermon by Pastor David Prince preached on 10/27/13 called “The Glory of God in the Face of Christ.” This sermon as well as Pastor David Prince’s sermon entitled “How to Interpret Your Life” (3/3/13) articulate powerfully Ashland’s commitment to the supremacy of Christ in all things. Both can be accessed from our website: www.ashlandlex.org/podcast.

⁵ Jeremy Haskins, “From Church Pews to Church Plants: Adoption Culture and the World Mission,” in *A Guide to Adoption and Orphan Care* (SBTS Press, 2012), ed. Russell D. Moore.

want to see supernatural transformation that only comes through the proclamation of the gospel. Pastor David Prince warns against laying the gospel aside in favor of raising “nice, happy, safe children.”⁶ These concerns for the family are also valid concerns for the church as a whole. Everything we do must be saturated with the gospel. Everything we do must remind us that Christ has accomplished everything pertaining to our salvation through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Everything we do must remind our people that we are now members of the Kingdom of Christ, and that one day that Kingdom will be consummated in the new heavens and the new earth where Jesus will reign as King forever. The gospel must shape how we think about everything, from the minutest details of our ministry on up to the things we see as most important. We must never settle for anything less than students transformed by the Holy Spirit into lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the gospel.

One consequence of building a gospel culture for our student ministry is a commitment to diversity. “Paul indicates that the triumph of the gospel on display in the church necessarily involves not only the reconciliation of people to God but also to one another (Eph. 2:11-22).”⁷ Our ministry must seek to represent the diversity of the Kingdom of Christ. We are not only interested in reaching white, middle-class students or even minority, working class students. We are intentionally trying to reach students from every race and from every socio-economic background. We believe that a gospel culture demands such a commitment.

This same commitment to a gospel culture demands a corresponding commitment to excellence in everything we do. The excellency of Christ demands that we not settle for mediocrity in ministry. If we commit to a ministry, we must strive to make that ministry worthy of the gospel through our promotion, planning, and attention to detail. We must fully commit to labor so that our ministry is a reflection of the glory of the gospel. To not give our all is to communicate that the gospel is simply not very important.

High View of the Local Church. Because we have a high view of Christ, we must necessarily have a high view of the church. We have no other choice. Christ has bound himself as head to his body inseparably. In fact, Paul calls the church “his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). John Calvin says of this verse, “This is the highest honour of the Church, that, until He is

⁶ David Prince, “Why Christian Parents Should Not Want Good, Happy, Safe Kids.” Accessed from <http://erlc.com/article/why-christian-parents-should-not-want-good-happy-safe-kids> on 1/22/13.

⁷ David Prince, “A Call for Gospel Audacity: Crucifying the Color Line in the Church One Pulpit at a Time,” accessed from <http://erlc.com/article/a-call-for-gospel-audacity-crucifying-the-color-line-in-the-church-one-pulpit> on 1/22/13.

united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation is it for us to learn, that, not until we are along with him, does he possess all his parts, or wish to be regarded as complete!”⁸ Indeed, it is hard to imagine the possibility of loving Christ without loving his church as well.

Churches often encourage teenagers to distance themselves from the rest of the body with ‘youth only’ ministries. Through ‘youth only’ worship services and activities, the youth ministry often takes on an identity of its own. ‘Big church’ seems to be less relevant to the student than youth group. Over time the gap between the youth ministry and the church body widens, and the life of the church body as a whole becomes foreign to the students. Our student ministry seeks to involve teenagers in every area of worship and service in the life of the church. We never want to create a “church” within the church with any of our ministries.

We also make a clear distinction between the local church and parachurch ministries. While parachurch ministries can be helpful in assisting the local church, they are never to compete with or serve as a replacement for local church membership and participation. Such ministries are valuable in reaching students on the school campus, but they honor Christ most when they see plugging disciples into local churches as the goal of their discipleship. Students will one day outgrow these ministries, but they will never outgrow Christ’s church. These ministries may seem more exciting than the local church, but the Bible tells us plainly that when the church gathers more is going on than meets the eye. Dr. Russell Moore explains:

In the Bible, a local church—with all its ridiculous flaws—is an unveiling of the mystery of the universe (Eph 3:6). The church is in a one-flesh union with Jesus so that, as in a marriage, everything that belongs to Him belongs to her (Eph 5:22-33). A congregation, in covenant with one another as an assembly of Christ’s people, is a colony of the coming global reign of Christ (Eph 1:22-23), a preview of what the Kingdom of Jesus will look like in the end (1 Cor 6:1-8). Where there is a covenant among believers, a disciplined community of faith, the spirit of Jesus is present among them, just as God was present among the people of Israel in the temple of old (Matt 18:15-20). When the church judges a repentant sinner to be a genuine believer, the congregation is speaking with the authority of Jesus when they plunge him beneath the waters (Matt 28:18-19). When the church judges an unrepentant sinner to be persistent in his rebellion, it is with the authority of Jesus that the congregation pronounces him to be a stranger to the people of God (1 Cor 5: 4-5; Matt

⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21 (Baker Books, 2003), 218.

18:15-20). When we gather for worship as a congregation in covenant with one another, we are not simply fueling our individual quiet times with praise choruses. We are instead actually ascending to the heavenly places together, standing before Christ and all of his angels on Mount Zion (Heb 12:18-29).⁹

It is difficult to overstate the importance Jesus places on the church.

High View of Families. Unfortunately, churches often encourage a low view of the family through programming that continuously keeps students and parents separated in the life of the body. Unintentionally, the church can send a message to parents that more trendy ministries designed specifically for the needs of teenagers are the most effective means for nurturing their children. Such a message has the potential to cause parents to shirk from their God-given task of parenting. This isolation can also cause the teenager to view the Christianity of their parents as irrelevant, especially since youth group activities often seem more exciting and vibrant. Thus a ministry that should help parents actually begins to erode their authority in the minds of their teens. Seeking to be a partner and a resource for parents in the task of parenting, our student ministry involves families in every area of our ministry.

Students do not benefit from being separated from their families. Sociologist Christian Smith writes, “Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”¹⁰ Researching young adults who remained in church after college, LifeWay Research finds that “across the board, 20 percent more of those who stayed indicated they had parents or family members who discussed spiritual things, gave them spiritual guidance and prayed together.”¹¹ These findings should not surprise Christians. From the beginning God has entrusted discipleship to parents (Deut. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:4). Leaving the family behind may better attract a crowd of teenagers, but championing the family is God’s way of producing lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ. The family plays a vital role in our battle plan.

⁹ Russell Moore, “Jesus Didn’t Die for a Campus Ministry: The Spiritual Danger of Unchurched Spirituality,” accessed from <http://www.russellmoore.com/2008/10/13/jesus-didnt-die-for-a-campus-ministrythe-spiritual-danger-of-unchurched-spirituality/> on 1/22/13.

¹⁰ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.

¹¹ Accessed on 1/23/14 from <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-parents-churches-can-help-teens-stay-in-church>.

Our refusal to abandon the family plays itself out in several practical ways in our ministry. First, we are committed to partnering with families. We are on the same team. Therefore, we try to keep open lines of communication in order to better connect what is happening at church to what is happening at home. Second, we want parents involved in everything we do and helping to lead our ministries. Parents of students often lead our Bible Fellowship Groups and Wednesday night small groups. Parents teach during our ministry events and lead on mission trips and service projects. There is always an open invitation for parents to participate in everything we do. Finally, we are committed to equipping parents in the task of discipling their children. Our equipping comes in the form of pastor-led parenting courses, resources and books that we put in the hands of parents to reinforce what we are teaching at church, and counseling and support for parents who are encountering difficulties. This partnership between the church and families is integral to our ministry to students.

However, our championing of families must never lead us to ignore students who do not find their way into the church through traditional means. For example, we do not overlook students from single-parent homes or from families that would never show up in church on their own. This commitment is one of the reasons we continue to use age segregation and see it as a valuable part of our ministry philosophy. If we keep students with their families at all times or define the church as a “family of families,” what does this communicate to those who do not fit the description?

The kingdom of Christ is more than a family of families. It is a family of ex-orphans from all walks of life. It is a family of misfits from a limitless number of social backgrounds. This type of student ministry works best when strong Christian families are inviting students from broken homes into their homes for dinner and picking them up for church. It is illustrated when the wealthy banker with four kids takes Communion bread shoulder-to-shoulder with the refugee from Bhutan. In our prizing of the family, “family-centered” must never replace “Christ-centered.” To be Christ-centered necessitates a high view of families without limiting the church’s ministry to the family. To be truly Christ-centered, we must uphold our love for families while not neglecting to minister to those who are in danger of falling through the cracks. The language of family-centricity is dangerous for this very reason. If we replace Christ from the center we are in danger of committing idolatry. However, if Christ remains central we will see every other aspect of life and ministry through the lens of the gospel. The result will inevitably be a high view of the family.

Age segregated ministry is also important because it enables students to begin to develop peer relationships and friendships within the church. Proverbs places great value on the importance of good friendships as an individual progresses in wisdom (Prov. 17:17; 27:9-10). We believe it is important for teenagers to develop their closest friendships with like-minded believers. The church provides a wonderful context for parents to play a role in the development of wise friendships with other believers.

High View of Students. Although we have used terms such as “adolescence” and “teenager” at times in this booklet for the sake of clarity, we prefer not to use those titles in the church context. Instead, we refer to our students who are typically labeled as “adolescents” in our culture as “young adults.” Culturally speaking, “adolescence” refers to a stage in life when people are no longer children, but are not yet considered adults. But this third category is a recent invention of Western culture. Throughout the history of the world, there have been two categories for people, childhood and adulthood. The consequence of this third category is that while students look like adults and have the capabilities of adults, we do not expect adult behavior or an adult level of responsibility from them. Thus, their spiritual development is stunted by the church’s low expectations.

At Ashland, our high view of students leads us to have high expectations for their lives. We do not sugar coat the biblical message. We do not edit out the mature themes of the biblical narrative. Our goal is never to merely entertain students. We proclaim the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), believing that if God has revealed it, they need to hear it. We expect them, once they’ve put their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, to function as responsible church members, using the gifts that God has uniquely bestowed upon them for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 12:1-11). We do not believe the lie that young adults have nothing to contribute and that now is the time in their lives when they should be carefree and irresponsible. Christ has entrusted young adults with spiritual gifts, and it is detrimental to the health of the church body when any member’s gift lies dormant.

High View of Gender Distinctions. While culture continues to blur the lines between male and female, we recognize that gender distinctions are part of God’s design for the world and considered very good (Gen. 1:27, 31). Males should never be ashamed of their masculinity, and females should never be ashamed of their femininity. Each gender has been given different roles to play in fulfilling the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28), and we must celebrate those differences. We strive to cultivate a gospel-centered culture where men are comfortable being men and women are comfortable being women.

Practically, this commitment means that we intentionally teach on biblical manhood and womanhood beginning in middle school. We do not want the voice of the serpent to speak louder than the Word of God on this issue. Additionally, we only allow men to teach young men (1 Tim. 2:12), and prefer women to teach younger women, especially in discipleship contexts. While men can teach women in mixed gender settings, the majority of our teaching happens in gender specific settings with men teaching young men and women teaching young women.

Our Goals

Our ministry goals naturally spring out of our convictions. While we set more specific goals periodically, these are our overriding goals that keep us stabilized on the desired result of our ministry. For example, when asked what we want for each and every student that comes through our student ministry, we respond with these goals: We want students who are radically committed to Christ and the gospel, bold in evangelism and missions, and responsible servants of the local church. Likewise, if asked what our goal is for the parents of our students, we respond that we want our parents to be equipped and assisted in the task of training students to treasure Christ above all else. The success of our ministry is never measured in the immediate. One successful event or outreach does not make a ministry. We long to see lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ, and these goals help us measure our progress in that.

To Promote Radical Commitment to Christ and the Gospel. Jesus does not have two levels of discipleship, one for adults and one for adolescents; his call is clear to all who would follow him. The demand for self-denial and cross-bearing (Lk. 9:23) applies to teenagers just as much as it applies to grandparents. Paul describes the Christian life in this way: “And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15). We want to see our students no longer living for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

We recognize that expectations typically breed results. If we expect little, we will probably get little. However, if we maintain high expectations, we are more likely to get higher results. Therefore, we intentionally raise the bar on student ministry by expecting much from our students. We consistently offer ways for them to serve the church and breed a sense of responsibility to the body. We encourage students to participate in church-wide ministries and train them to think and live with a gospel worldview. We long to see our students mature into Christian husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, missionaries

and teachers and stay-at-home moms, who will remain faithful to Christ long past their time in our student ministry.

To Endorse a Bold Obligation to Evangelism and the Mission. Our Lord Jesus left the church with marching orders before he ascended into heaven: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). This passage describes the primary task that the church is to pursue as we await the return of King Jesus. Our mission is worldwide evangelism and discipleship. If we are not making disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded, we are not faithfully following Jesus.

We want our students to feel a burden for the nations from the earliest age. This effort begins even in our Journey Children’s Ministry. Our children grow up hearing missionary stories and meeting real missionaries from our church. They write letters to missionaries that we, as a church, have sent out. They pray for missions and are challenged with the missionary call from the earliest of ages. All of this is intentional. We do not want the default question of our church members to be, “Why should we go?” Instead, we want the default question to be, “Why should we stay?” Missions and evangelism are simply what Christ’s disciples do. It’s who we are, and that applies to all ages.

We provide evangelism training so that students can articulate the gospel in their own contexts. We want them to feel natural talking about Jesus in a culture where that often feels very strange. We also provide opportunities for them to evangelize through mission trips and other outreach events. We encourage students to invite unchurched friends to our ministries and events. Importantly, we also offer parents opportunities to model evangelism before their children. This modeling within the context of the family is the most effective way to train students in evangelism and the mission.

To Produce Responsible Servants of the Church. In writing about the spiritual gifts that God gives his people, Paul says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit does not bless us with his presence primarily for own benefit. His intentions in gifting us are so that we would bless one another. In the economy of the church, we are blessed to be a blessing. If our students miss out on this opportunity, not only will the church suffer, but also our students will suffer spiritually. Spirituality minus service is not Christianity. Our students will only grow spiritually when they learn to replace self with Christ at the center of their lives.

Therefore, we never refrain from encouraging students to serve in all sorts of ways. We want our students singing in the choir, serving in the nursery, and participating in the life of the church on every level. We also plan unique ministries to give our students opportunities to serve those within the body they would not ordinarily interact with. We desire all of our students to use the gifts God has given them “for the common good.”

To Equip and Assist Parents in the Task of Training Students to Treasure Christ above All Else. To have the biggest impact on students, we must also have a big impact on their parents. Therefore, our ministry seeks to minister to the whole family. We realize that the world presents many challenges for parents who are seeking to raise their children to treasure Christ above all else. We are most successful in ministry when parents feel supported and equipped by their church. We never want to replace the God-given role that parents have in their child’s life. Instead, we seek to partner with parents in a variety of ways.

Equipping takes place primarily through the church’s existing discipleship structures. We encourage older men and women to invest in younger men and women, and this happens on a variety of levels, most notably in Bible Fellowship Groups. Our pastors also lead parenting courses and regularly give direction on parenting from the pulpit. As we plan events, we try to communicate clearly with parents about the topics that we are addressing and encourage them to follow-up at home. We also provide resources to be used at home that coincide with what we are addressing at church. Parents need to know that they are not alone in this difficult but rewarding endeavor.

What It Looks Like (A Look into Some of Our Ministries)

At Ashland, we intentionally avoid the kind of student ministry that plays on emotional highs and zeroes in on a few big spiritual moments. Following Jesus takes place in the context of everyday life, and everyday life is not always new and exciting. If we are not careful, the shape of our ministry can very easily cause students to make wrong assumptions about life in Christ. We want to teach our students to follow Christ when times are good and when times are bad and at every point in between. So, when we plan ministry events, we are always planning with the intention of preparing students to live for Christ in the grind of life.

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne use the illustration of a trellis and a vine to explain how we often lose focus in ministry. A trellis is the structure that enables

the vine to grow by providing support. Vine work involves the proclamation of the Word of God: “planting, watering, fertilizing, and tending the vine.” Vine work requires structure, and that’s where the trellis comes in. Trellis work in the church includes leadership structures, event planning, management, and organization. This work is necessary, but it’s important that it doesn’t become the focus. The danger, however, is that Christian ministers can easily neglect the vine and spend almost all their time and energy on the trellis. Marshall and Payne explain, “Trellis work is easier and less personally threatening. Vine work is personal and requires much prayer. It requires us to depend on God, and to open our mouths and speak God’s word in some way to another person.” However, not only is trellis work easier than vine work, it often seems more impressive: “It’s more visible and structural. We can point to something tangible—a committee, an event, a program, a budget, infrastructure—and say that we have achieved something. We can build our trellis till it reaches to the heavens, in the hope of making a name for ourselves, but there may still be very little growth in the vine.”¹²

The ministry of the Word of God is the most important thing we can do. It may not draw the largest crowd and it may not always look exciting, but it produces supernatural transformation in the lives of students. When God’s Word is clearly taught lives are changed. The power of God’s Word is why some of the most important things we do in student ministry are not exciting trips and impressive events, even though these ministries often provide the trellis for the vine to grow. The most important times for our ministry are when Bible Fellowship Group leaders invest in the lives of students by teaching them the Word of God week after week, or when parents come upstairs every Wednesday night to train students in reading the Bible or thinking with a biblical worldview. These ministries are not glitzy or glamorous. They are actually pretty unspectacular on the surface of things. But is not the gospel often unspectacular on the surface of things? We are not trying to produce a sequence of mountain top experiences for our students. We are instead attempting to partner with parents in the grind of life to prepare students for lifetime commitment to Christ.

Several of our ministries provide a distinctive glimpse into what this ministry philosophy looks like in practice. While we are not limited to these ministries, they do help capture our vision, convictions, and goals:

Reality Check Weekend. Reality Check Weekend is an annual discipleship event that revolves around a theme such as “Witness,” “Designed,”

¹² Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Matthias Media, 2009), 7-10.

and “This is War.” The event features a live band, a keynote speaker, a service project, and a series of small group conversations led by families in their homes. Students spend the weekend together in various host homes and are challenged by leaders to follow Christ radically. Reality Check Weekend provides us with a context to display many of our convictions and work toward many of our goals. Because parents are leading small groups, we are championing the influence of the family in the lives of students. The service project provides students with a way to serve others for the sake of the gospel. The content of the weekend always seeks to train students to live for Christ and often gives them practical training in things like evangelism and living out the gospel at school. The event also features a parents’ session in which one of our pastors challenges the parents on the same theme of the weekend. We desire for this event to spark discussions long after the weekend is over.

Summer Mission Trip. Ashland has a long-standing commitment to do ministry in the city of New Orleans. For one week every summer we take a group of students and parents to serve in New Orleans, partnering with NOBTS in children and youth ministries, evangelism, and church planting. We use this week to further train our students in evangelism, and then we offer them immediate opportunities to put their training into practice. Our summer mission trip is unique in that it offers students a continuing partnership with a faithful church that is ministering in a very difficult context. Our students get to build relationships in New Orleans and return year after year to continue laboring toward spreading a passion for the supremacy of Christ in all things for the joy of all peoples.

Conclusion

As the war rages on, we can fight with confidence. Jesus has already ultimately won. However, we must not relax. We must not rest. Individual souls are still up for grabs. Paul exhorts us to “put on the whole armor of God” in order “to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). We believe that the war is won by relying on Christ and the means Christ has given to his church. We have been given prayer and God’s Word. We have also been given a community with each individual member receiving gifts from the Spirit to serve the body. Finally, we have been given strong families. It is our goal to rely on Christ and these powerful weapons in championing the supremacy of Christ by raising up a generation of gospel-committed students.