



O N E

"I AM DESPERATE"

An Embracing of Brokenness

des•per•ate (dēs'pər-īt)

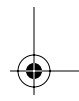
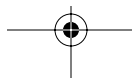
1. Marked by, arising from, or showing despair.
2. Undertaken out of extreme urgency or as a last resort.
3. Nearly hopeless; critical.
4. Suffering or driven by great need or distress.



My dad grew up in southeastern Oregon, a vast expanse of desert and sagebrush punctuated with the occasional ranch and even more occasional community. It was a culture where actions spoke much louder than words, and substance was preferred over style. Even after he was over a half century removed from that environment, Dad occasionally reverted to rancher jargon in describing someone whose assets or accomplishments didn't back up his boastful speech or appearance of affluence: "Big hat, no cattle."



In recent years the Western church has come under considerable scrutiny and criticism for a similar malady: we have "big hats" of style but sometimes are lacking in the "cattle" of substance. Over the past few decades, we have published millions of Christian books, burned millions of Christian music CDs, sold many millions of dollars worth of Christian T-shirts, pencils, bumper stickers and assorted other paraphernalia, and logged uncountable hours of radio and TV broadcasts. Yet we have done far too little to stem the moral and ethical decay





of our country, much less advance the kingdom of God in significant ways.

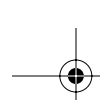
Although youth ministry has been a vanguard of trends such as networking and strategic collaboration, we would be dishonest not to admit that the “big hat, no cattle” tag applies to us more than we would like. Yes, youth ministry has certainly come of age over the past few decades. We are generally biblically and philosophically sound and culturally relevant. We understand the importance of campus ministry and the best ways to make it happen. We tend to value relational ministry and understand how to present the gospel to teenagers in a relevant manner. We often see students come to Christ. We make disciples. We work with increasing effectiveness with parents and families. We are “professional.” And we are doing a pretty good job. But unless the statistics lie, we still have quite a ways to go to fulfill the Great Commission among students.

Contemporary youth ministry has at its disposal more training materials, books, Sunday school curricula, conferences and various other resources than at any time in history. So how come we haven’t made a more significant impact in the youth culture we seek to reach? Postmodern author Leonard Sweet is blunt but honest:

Traditional “youth ministry” won’t work any longer. Nor does the entertainment/message model of the 60’s and 70’s. Nor does the “trickle-down” strategy . . . in which you attract the most popular kids, the “group” that is “in,” and you’ve got everyone else. Why?

No one “group” is “in” anymore; groups have demas-
sified into affinity communities. There is no one “youth
ministry” possible anymore because there is now not





one "youth group" anymore. Besides the jocks, there are now the bands, blacks, blonds, brains, computer people, cools, crews, dorks, druggies, floaters, FOBs (fresh off the boat), friendlies, groovies, hippies, losers, nerds, nobodies, normals, overly violent, . . . partiers, peace freaks, pom-poms, rappers, richies, . . . smokers, snobs, stoners, tides, trendies, wannabes, wavers, weirdos, and yuppies."¹

Mark Senter concurs with Sweet:

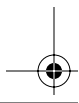
The decade . . . has drawn to a close and the health of ministries to high school students in the United States is less than exciting. . . . The time has come for revolution—a total restructuring of youth ministry. Continued modifications of the current system simply will not keep up with the changes in the world in which we live. . . . There is no way in which the tactics currently being used will stem the tidal wave of spiritual, moral, and psychological problems faced by the current and coming generations of adolescents.²

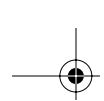
Clearly, something has to change in order for us to minister effectively to youth. But what is that something?

A Response Born of Desperation

When Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, discovered that invading armies were at his doorstep (2 Chronicles 20:1-3), his normal response would have been to sound the *shofar** and muster his army as quickly as possible to defend the city. That was the standard operating procedure in a country familiar with invading armies and

*TRANSLATION:
BUGLE.





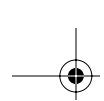
the tactics of warfare. But Jehoshaphat didn't respond normally. The invading armies were too big (the Bible says they were "vast") and too close (Hazazon Tamar, or En Gedi, was a small oasis on the west coast of the Dead Sea about twenty-five miles away; access to Jerusalem was only by narrow paths up the steep cliffs from the shore, so it was not a common attack route, thus the surprise). He realized that despite the reputation of the army of Judah as valiant warriors, this particular battle had defeat written all over it.

So Jehoshaphat responded by calling his people together not to prepare for battle but to pray and fast. In verses 6-12 he leads his people in a heart-felt prayer that acknowledges God's sovereignty (v. 6) and past faithfulness (vv. 7-9). But it is the end of his prayer that reveals his heart: "O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. *We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you*" (2 Chronicles 20:12, emphasis mine).

Jehoshaphat was a true biblical realist. He saw his circumstances as they really were and humbly admitted that his army, on its own, had no chance of victory. He also admitted that as a seasoned military commander in charge of veteran troops, he had no clue what to do to divert disaster. So he chose to shift his focus and that of his countrymen from the opposing armies and the battle itself to God and God alone. They fixed their eyes firmly on the only Source of both victory and the power to accomplish it. In doing so, he came to see his circumstances from God's perspective. He recognized that their obstacle was God's opportunity.

God responded to Jehoshaphat's humble prayer of desperation with a prophetic word of encouragement from Jahaziel (2 Chronicles 20:14-17), as well as a battle strategy unlike any they had utilized before: they were to place at the front of the





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army not the shield-bearers or spear-throwers or archers, but the worship leaders! The Chronicler records the result:

After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

"Give thanks to the LORD,
for his love endures forever."

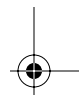
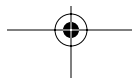
As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. (2 Chronicles 20:21-22)

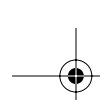
Jehoshaphat's example is foundational in our discussion of youth ministry from the inside out. He turned to God in humility and desperation because he didn't have another option. As youth workers engaged in an epic spiritual battle for the lives of emerging generations of youth, we also don't have any other options but to humbly seek God.

Youth workers must become desperate. If it's true that the emerging generations of youth are in a **desperate situation**,* and if it's true that desperate situations demand desperate measures, it's time for desperate praying and desperate ministering. Yet isn't it also true that such works of desperation are just that—works—unless they spring from an awareness of our *own* desperation and brokenness?

*DO I
HEAR AN
"AMEN"?

Sensing the despair of a hopeless generation may, indeed, make us desperate to bring them a message of hope. But our desperation must begin at a deeper, personal level.





Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers;
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.

Help us, O God our Savior,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins
for your name's sake. (Psalm 79:8-9)

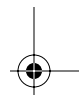
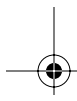
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

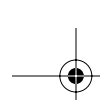
This is the one I esteem:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2)



Turning youth ministry inside out requires a desperation that begins in our own lives. Nancy Leigh DeMoss goes to the heart of the matter:

Before its impact can be felt in a home, a church, or a nation, revival must first be experienced on a personal level in the hearts of men and women who have encountered God in a fresh way. And the single greatest hindrance to our experiencing personal revival is our unwillingness to humble ourselves and confess our desperate need for His mercy. Our generation has been programmed to pursue happiness, wholeness, good feelings about ourselves, positive self-image, affirmation, and cures for our hurt feelings and damaged psyches. But God is not as interested in these ends as we are. He is more committed to making us holy than making us happy. And there is only one pathway to holiness—





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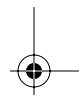
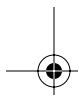
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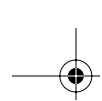
one road to genuine revival—and that is the pathway of humility or brokenness.³

Tim St. Clair defines *brokenness* as "our response of humility and obedience to the conviction of God's Spirit or the revelation of God's Word, . . . the shattering of a person's will so that every response is under the control of the Holy Spirit of God."⁴ Youth ministry from the inside out begins with our acknowledgment, individually and corporately, that we are broken people who tend to minister out of the "broken cisterns" (Jeremiah 2:13-14) of personal skills and charisma, tried and true programs, or creative strategies. It begins with our realization that we desperately need renewal, day by day, individually and corporately.

These are strong words, but they come from the depth of my own heart as I daily acknowledge my own brokenness and desperation. As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, I have wept over the generations of youth to which I am called. Likely you have as well. But increasingly, I weep over my own "stuff"—pride, arrogance and rebellion, feelings of self-importance, a desire for recognition and a tendency to follow my sinful nature (Romans 7:15-20).

I have been doing youth ministry long enough that I know how to say all the right words and wear the "big hat" of competency. As one who now ministers in the prayer movement, I can do the same in that realm. But I know that inside things are not always as they outwardly appear. When I taught kids in my youth groups about sin, I used to ask for volunteers to write their ten worst sins of thought or action during the past week on a transparency so I could project them on the wall for the rest of us to see. That would generate a lot of chuckles but very few volunteers. I would never want my sins projected on





the wall. I am very aware that behind my supposed big hat is a very, very small herd of cattle. I need renewal. And so the cry of my own heart has increasingly echoed that of Habakkuk, who even as he pondered the promise of renewal and revival where

the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of
the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14),

still cried out to God:

LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy. (3:2)

Lord, have mercy on me.

