

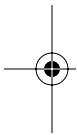
## Introduction

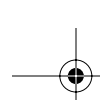
Tylor was sixteen years old when he was tragically killed in an auto accident. Our youth ministry staff was devastated when we got the word, since he had been actively involved in leadership development. Little did we know the depth of his life and extent of his faith.

Tylor was a special young man, not because he was overflowing with talent, gifts and charm, but because he was a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ. He knew how to have fun even though he had adolescent issues to deal with like all teenagers. But Tylor comprehended the depth of faith that comes only by seeking the face of God. Out of his commitment to dwell in the presence of God, Tylor learned the importance of being a servant. It was through his service that so many were impacted by his life.

We weren't the only ones amazed by Tylor's life. So were his parents, Chris and Trish.

When Tylor left us, everyone from his life came together; it became a validation, a celebration, of the extraordinary life he lived, passionate for God. We knew he had an interest in and love for God. But perhaps like many parents, we didn't realize how deep his passion was. His death was an eye-opener.





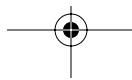
At church, Tylor worked with the children's ministry. We thought it was just his way of avoiding the main service. Yet Tylor took to it naturally. It was like breathing to him.

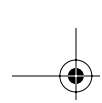
From a young age, he'd always talked about being a professional athlete or an actor. But the January prior to his death, he informed us he was supposed to be a youth minister. Looking back now, it should have been clear to us. His life wasn't for show. His faith was real, and his heart was the heart of a youth pastor.

When he asked to serve on the teen staff at YouthFront Camp all summer long, once again we assumed less than the best—he's trying to get out of working. We asked him how he planned to find gas money to drive out to camp. He simply answered, "God's going to provide it." Somehow he knew God wanted him out there. We found out later how God had used him that summer. After his death, we heard from many teen staffers about how Tylor was always the listening ear, empathizing with others' thoughts and struggles.

Walking into Tylor's room after his death, we began to discover precious insights into his private life: his drawing, his journaling. We found he had been contemplating and questioning God. He had been looking for truth, reading through his Bible. It began to occur to us that neither of us had ever attempted his kind of search for the real God. Could it be that God was using Tylor's death to make us think more deeply about our own lives? About who God is?

Before Tylor's death we were searching for God—we thought. Learning of Tylor's deep spiritual life through his journal, his friends, and the Altar [a contemplative weekend of prayer and meditation on Scripture] made us realize that our own spiritu-





ality could be so much deeper. Our search for his faith has brought us closer to God.

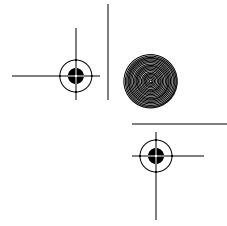
Tylor was not the typical youth group kid who viewed church and a relationship with God as just another one of many things to fit into a busy life. Tylor was living a deep life with God nurtured by an environment I am referring to in this book as *presence-centered youth ministry*. Tylor was a young man with a full, authentic life in Jesus; his life still speaks very loudly to those who knew him.

According to data from denominations and research organizations, a majority of youth are walking away from the institutional church when they reach late adolescence, and most don't come back. But are they walking away from Jesus or from the way we do church and youth ministry? Young people haven't weighed Jesus in the balance and found his radical life and message irrelevant and uninspiring, but they are tired of church environments that allow the message of the gospel to be diminished. More and more young people are refusing to embrace the church cultures they have grown up in.

It's time for a thorough examination of our youth ministry philosophy and praxis. We need to create an authentic atmosphere for our young people to seek truth and discover who they are in Jesus. Youth ministry must move away from behavioral modification techniques and focus on creating environments for genuine spiritual transformation. We must guide young people into the presence of God.

The shift I propose begins with youth workers who live out of the wholeness of their own souls, who nurture a personal spirituality that makes Jesus Christ the center of everything. Youth need youth workers who dwell in the presence of God and are willing to walk along with them on the journey regardless of how often they are prone to personal detours.





I think the most important thing that could happen in youth ministry is to have passionate people working for it. I have seen so many youth workers in ministry who don't have a passion for it, and I think that hurts it more than anything else.

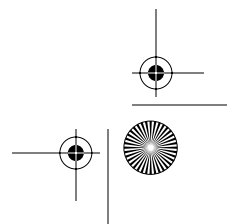
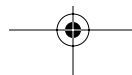
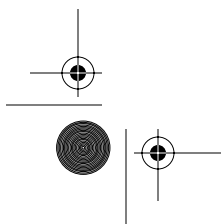
**JESSICA, 17 YEARS OLD**

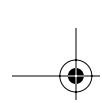
In this book I will offer a critique of evangelical youth ministry practice and suggest correctives. This is done out of a passion for evangelicalism and love of the church. I believe much of this critique will also apply to a growing faction within postliberal mainline and evangelically oriented Catholic youth ministry. My hope is that this work will strengthen youth workers' convictions that young people need women and men of God in their lives—spiritual guides and mentors—first and foremost, over and above program specialists, social planners, cultural experts, comedians, behavioral therapists, event coordinators or video game specialists. As youth workers we must be passionate pursuers of God and invite youth to come with us on the journey.

I will examine Christian formation; discuss theological concerns and issues; look at the importance of nurturing environments that are safe for young people to discover their being and identity; explore the significance of creating sacred space for encountering God; examine ways to expose youth to spiritual practices without alarming them; all to help you be a spiritual guide to the youth God has brought into your life.

During the process of writing this book, I surveyed and talked with a hundred adolescents who have held on to a living faith at a time when so many of their peers are walking away from the church and faith. Throughout this book you will see the comments of these young people.

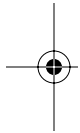
Hearing the passion and dreams of today's generation of young people for a dynamic church and a radical faith in Jesus fills me with





optimism for the future. My prayer is that those of us working in the church and involved in youth ministry will nurture this passionate quest of young people instead of being an obstacle. Our calling as spiritual guides for adolescents is perhaps best expressed in this prayer by Thomas Merton:

My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.<sup>1</sup>

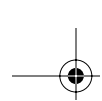


**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Thank you to all the adolescents involved in YouthFront who helped with this project: you inspire me.





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To Vicki, my wife of thirty years: I love you so much and can't imagine life without you.

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