

Six Years and a Blank Piece of Paper

(Written by Andy Harrison for Leading Student Ministry Magazine, LifeWay, Summer 2004)

Early on in my youth ministry experience, I found planning for discipleship somewhat of a nightmare. I would purchase a large desk calendar that put the entire year right in front of me. Then I would pull out every resource catalog I could find, sit down, and begin trying to fill the calendar with study options, retreat plans and ministry opportunities. I agonized over my choices, but when I looked at the completed picture, that full calendar, I experienced an easing of the conscience, a momentary mental pat-on-the-back complete with a short prayer and a brief, but noticeable, spiritual euphoria.

Looking back, I have to wonder, what was I thinking? A full calendar equals discipleship? Considering that 70% of those studies I chose had at least one chapter on sexual purity, my students had to think that I had some serious hang-ups about sex. Either that or my picture of an American teenage disciple was the same as that of your typical Gregorian monk.

Today, some of the questions I am asked most often regarding discipleship are, “What studies do you recommend?” and “What is good material for a DiscipleNow?” or “Is there anything you would suggest for junior high students?” I think I understand what is often the nature of those questions...somebody’s calendar has an open spot.

Over time I’ve come to learn that for me, the important question was not, “Which study do I use and when?” but rather, “Which study best fits my overall plan and how?” In the early years, my plan was to fill my calendar with good things. Later on, my plan was to fill students with good things. Important things. Essential things.

If you have a student for six years (7th –12th Grade), then you must use those years wisely. You want them to come away from your youth group with a firm grasp on several key issues, doctrines, ethical positions, and spiritual disciplines. So instead of a blank calendar, what you need is a blank piece of paper and some fellow youth workers. Get together and make a list of the essentials of the Christian faith, those non-negotiable, must-know subjects for your students. Pray over the list. Spend some time on it. Once you, as a team, have determined the essentials, then you can drag out the calendar and begin a targeted approach to nurturing and discipling your students. You won’t be picking a study because it is the latest and greatest, or because it promotes itself as “middle school only” or for any other reason other than it meets your pre-determined need.

Of course, times will come where the special needs of your group or their circumstances will dictate a change in topics. There is a suicide at school, so the topic shifts to help students with their grief and shock. Flexibility is critical, but having a strategic plan helps ensure you stay on target for shaping a student’s life.

On graduation day, it is much more pleasing to know that you filled a graduate’s heart than that you filled his/her schedule.