Les Christie’s response to Andy Root’s article

My book, *When Church Kids Go Bad*, was written to help youth workers make our youth ministries safe places for hurting kids. We need youth ministries that are a refuge for kids to feel both physically and emotionally safe. Places for all kids, and especially troubled kids, so they can hear and see the love of God.

Andrew raises the question regarding the purpose of youth ministry, asking “is it for making and keeping kids good?” The simple answer would be “no.” Our goal in ministry is to have students receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. We want students to be embraced by his love. Because of this encounter with Jesus our students’ lives are changed through their relationship with Jesus. We are all to be transformed; there are many examples in Scripture. Saul, who openly persecuted Christians, became Paul—a changed man. The apostle John, who was a violent and angry man before his encounter with Jesus, had an astonishing transformation. He became known as the “apostle of love” because, more than anyone else in Scripture, he both taught and embodied love. Jesus was able to channel that hate into something good. Our goal in youth ministry is not behavior modification, but it seems to occur when we embrace the Holy Spirit and respond to his work in our life. One of the fruits of the spirit is "goodness" (Galatians 5:22).

Jesus did associate with those in the shadows but he did not leave them there. We are to reach kids wherever we find them but not to leave them there. When Jesus encountered the woman caught in adultery and the woman at the well he did not leave them there.

Andrew also asks if youth ministries are avoiding the bad? We are told to be in the world but not be of the world (John 17:13-16). It is almost impossible to avoid having the bad spill on us. I had a speaker in one of my classes this semester suggest to my university students that if kids want to use drugs we should let them do so in our youth meetings. It’s an old idea but it doesn’t work. I’ve had parents say to me, “I don’t want my kids to have sex before marriage, but if they are going to do it I want them to do it in our home.” To assert that church kids must go bad is absurd. They already are bad. There is evil in all of us.

We don’t need to expose kids to the dark side. It is all around them. In my years of youth ministry I rarely meet bright and shiny students (many of them are covering up hurts). Most of the students I meet are in deep pain because of the bad around them. We need to be teaching kids to flee immorality. Check out Joseph in the Old Testament, running out of a house in his BVD’s fleeing Potiphar’s lusting wife (Genesis 39:6-12).

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