

THE STUDENT

A GUIDE AND HANDBOOK FOR

MINISTRY

LEADERS AND VOLUNTEERS

VOLUNTEER

WRITTEN BY

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The Student Ministry Volunteer

A Guide and Handbook for Student Ministry
Leaders and Volunteers

By Weston Blaha

Why Volunteer in Student Ministry?

Student Ministry is critical in the life of the local church. Many adults can trace their faith back to their teenage years and have strong memories of the influence that student ministry volunteers had in their lives. These instances demonstrate the truth that God uses older Christians to disciple those who are younger in age and in spiritual maturity. The following verses attest to this:

"Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

Proverbs 27:17

"Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Proverbs 22:6

"Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,"

Titus 2:3-4

"You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

2 Timothy 2:1-2

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 5:14-16

We can also look at the examples of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, or Paul and Titus—to name only a few. Of course, there are numerous other places where we can find a positive command to invest in the younger generation of Christians. But, as shown above, we do not have to look far to realize that God calls more mature Christians to support

less mature Christians. Effective discipleship is accomplished in two main ways: 1) when more mature Christians live a life that warrants younger generations' admiration, and 2) when those more mature Christians choose to invest in younger generations.

The Problem

Today's teens are longing for validation, direction, and truth. We must realize that our Western society has made purposeful strides to erase objective standards and replace them with subjective, relativistic impulses. Because of this, we have a generation of young adults who are searching for someone trustworthy to guide them through some of the most pivotal decisions of their (thus-far) brief lives.

As a generalization, our society tends to "helicopter parent" our children through high school, then expect them to determine the career path to which they will dedicate the rest of their lives. Often, the result is that teenagers who may have never packed a school lunch must now borrow \$30k¹ in student debt, which will significantly impact their future. According to Dennis Thompson from HealthDay News, parents of teens are aware of the problem. Below is a portion of Thompson's article:

¹ The average student loan debt amount after graduating college according to www.usnews.com

"But mom and dad aren't confident that these strategies are helping teens build all the skills they'll need while they are attending college or moving into their first apartment:

- Just 8 percent were confident their teen could make an appointment with a doctor on their own.
- Only 25 percent thought their teen could dole out the correct dose of an over-the-counter medication.
- About 41 percent expected their kid to eat healthy foods.
- Around 46 percent think their teen will save money for the future.
- Only half believed that their teen could handle a minor injury with first aid.
- About 65 percent thought their kid would get enough sleep to maintain their health."

Because of this, we have a generation of young adults who are often under-prepared and ill-equipped to meet the intellectual demands and religious attacks of the world. When parents begin to realize the quick-approaching freedom which their children will have in college, they begin to make difficult decisions. Often, the judgments made are unpopular with their children. At times, the result is a parent who is too close to the situation to speak into their children's lives as effectively as they would like. The nature of parent/youth relationships greatly contributes to why student ministry is critical in teenagers' lives.

A Solution

At this point, you might ask, "Isn't this why we hire a student ministry leader? To help with these things?" And the short answer is: no. *A church hires a student ministry leader (SML) to offer the spiritual guidance and relational connections needed to partner with parents to establish a firm foundation of faith for the church's teenagers.* Naturally, these other departures of wisdom will flow out of this relationship. However, I have often found that it is the volunteers, not the paid youth workers, with whom students will share their crippling fears and overwhelming pressures.

I believe this is due to the nature of the volunteer-youth relationship. There is something uniquely honest, genuine, and non-threatening to the eyes of a teenager when speaking to a volunteer. This is mainly because volunteers are not "paid to care"; instead, they care and are thus present. Selfless care has a long reach. Why volunteer in student ministry? Because volunteers naturally bridge a significant gap that church staff and parents are often unable to fill adequately.

What is Expected of a Volunteer?

The answer to this question is not nearly as daunting as you might expect. Many would-be volunteers fail to become engaged because they fear the expectations of the title. But if asked, the Student Ministry Leader would be happy to ease those concerns. In other words, *a church's student ministry often lacks adequate volunteer support simply because there is poor communication of expectations.* To help with this disconnect, I have compiled a list of general expectations for student ministry volunteers:

1. Be Present.

As apparent as this may seem, an absent volunteer is an ineffective volunteer. Before students trust a volunteer, they must know that the volunteer cares enough about the students to make them a priority. The best volunteers are the ones that show up consistently.

2. Be Punctual.

Your SML depends on you, so do not leave him questioning if you will be on time. If you sign-up to volunteer in your church's student ministry, please be sure it is a commitment you can honor with consistency.

3. Be Excited.

Be a cheerleader for the ministry! As a volunteer, everything the student ministry does is fun. If you are above what is happening in the student ministry, so will the students you serve.

4. Be On The Student Ministry Leader's Team.

All too often, people volunteer because they dislike some aspect of the student ministry, whether it be direction, style, or ministry philosophy. Working to undermine the ministry of your SML is not the appropriate approach to solving any of the church's perceived student ministry woes. If you volunteer, make sure you can commit to being on the SML's team.

5. Be Wise On Social Media.

The students with whom you volunteer will want to know all about you. That means that they will track-down your social media accounts. If you are careless and represent a poor Christian testimony on social media, you may lose your position as a moral role model. You might even shift from "respected role model" to "cool adult friend." Although the latter may be tempting, the former position imparts biblical wisdom and influence, while the other does not.

6. Be A Godly Influence.

Teenagers need close, godly influences in their lives that are neither parents nor peers. If not found in their

immediate relationship circles, then pop-culture icons or social trends will become major influencers. Display the kind of character that points to the love of Jesus and a life of sanctification.

7. Be Part Of The Process.

Proverbs 22:6 states, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." The ultimate objective of a ministry volunteer is to help sharpen the next generation.

Sometimes, the essential roles that achieve that sharpening are not as apparent as others. But that is okay! A sharp sword requires a blacksmith, stone, hammer, anvil, fire, wood, water, and water bucket. Everything contributes to a sharp blade in a unique and essential way. Do what you do well; a wise SML would never demand more.

8. Be Above Suspicion.

The sad reality of our world is that we are all fallen and sinful. In acknowledging that, we have an extra responsibility to shield those who cannot defend themselves. At times, the church has been abused by people with malicious intent toward its children. Because of this, a volunteer must be above suspicion at all times. Notable areas to be cautious of include: physical contact with students, public engagements, digital interactions, and isolated activities. Every church should have policies in place to protect the leaders and the students. Your SML will make sure you are aware of procedures and best practices.

Closing Thoughts

Volunteer qualifications do not require perfect people or personality “rock-stars.” The best volunteer is the one that can fulfill each of the eight expectations mentioned above. We need godly men and woman who, with all their faults and imperfections, demonstrate a life striving for sanctification. The Student Ministry Leader is no different; a sinner seeking to be like Christ.

Eleven Common Ways to Volunteer.

Student ministry is full of volunteer opportunities. Most ministries work with students in a seemingly unending number of ways. Often, a student minister must become the "Swiss Army Knife" of the church. Others assume that since they are often young, they can handle Information Technology problems, take out the garbage, help move that desk, connect with students with any specific interest, lead worship, and teach like a seminary professor. Additionally, they are expected to teach in a manner that challenges both middle schoolers and high school students!

Trustworthy, loving, and supportive volunteers are some of a SML's greatest needs. As you may have already noticed, "student ministry" is broad in scope, and is most effective with great help. Listed below are eleven common ways volunteers can serve their church, students, and ministry leaders:

1. Volunteer To Pray For The Ministry.

It is a great comfort and encouragement to know that others in the church pray for the student ministry.

Sometimes student ministry feels like a "silo" ministry, left alone to thrive or fail. A committed pray warrior is a welcome blessing.

2. Help With Meals.

Many student ministries provide meals for the students. One of the greatest blessings in my ministry has been parents who were willing to coordinate and facilitate the weekly meal schedule. This took one critical task off my plate as I prepared to teach the students each week.

3. Crowd Control.

As crazy as this may be to hear, teenagers do not always sit still and pay attention. There are times when students cause disruptions in worship, wander into areas they shouldn't, or miss the call to go inside. Adults who can be present to patrol, keep students safe, and help transition students to their proper places are very helpful.

4. Lead A Small Group.

Student ministries can never have enough small group leaders. This role has the greatest potential to influence students' lives because it is in small group situations that they begin to talk. The conversations are usually about real-life, ground-level struggles in which the students need advice. The goal is for these relationships to develop into one-on-one discipleship opportunities. SMLs covet trusted, godly leaders who can serve in this capacity.

5. Teach Sunday School.

Consistent Sunday School teachers are one of the more challenging roles to fill. Sunday School requires adults who are willing to study and prepare for Sunday mornings. Students are tired and, often, less-than-enthusiastic about

attending. An engaging, knowledgeable, and reliable Sunday School teacher is a great benefit to any ministry.

6. Assist With Transportation.

If you are someone who has the flexibility to help drive a van or bus route to pick up students, it would be a tremendous blessing to the students, the parents, and the SML. Due to work schedules, many students' parents lack the time or ability to transport their children to church events. A ride provision would be a significant asset to the ministry.

7. Work Behind The Scenes.

Much of what allows student ministry to "tick" happens behind-the-scenes. A capable volunteer who can run sound, slides, cameras, lighting, etc., takes pressure off the SML.

8. Assist With Photography and Videography.

One of the most difficult tasks to accomplish without a designated volunteer is skilled in photography and videography. If the SML commits sufficient time in this area, he will not be able to invest as much quality time with the students. A capable volunteer who is willing to take this task upon themselves will free up the SML to invest more time building relationships with students.

9. Chaperone a Trip.

There are never enough chaperones. Although a 1 to 10 ratio of adults to students may appear adequate, it is a bare

minimum ratio. SMLs are always searching for trip chaperones.

10. Social Media Director.

You might be amazed to discover how much creative time and energy can go into a single social media post. The trick with social media regarding teenagers is this: You are better off not posting at all than posting something cheesy or low quality. It takes time to run a quality social media account for students. If you have an eye for this type of ministry, it would be a tremendous blessing to your church's SML.

11. Set-up/Clean-up.

By the end of the night, Student Ministry Leaders are exhausted. Often, hours of set-up and effort lead up to each youth meeting. Sometimes, the amount of work can detract from preparation for the lesson. A committed volunteer(s) will help alleviate the stress that surrounds set-up and clean-up.

What to Expect from your Student Ministry Leader?

Thus far, we have discussed (1) the need for student ministry volunteers, (2) the qualities of great volunteers, and (3) eleven common areas in which to volunteer. Lastly, it is vital to note that an SML has his own set of expectations. Volunteers need direction and oversight from the person in charge. For ministry leaders and volunteers to work together effectively, the SML must be able to—at minimum—commit to the following:

1. Your SML Will Communicate Often and Early.

Communication is vital in any situation in which more than one person is involved. Many SMLs have earned a reputation for poor communication skills and last-minute preparation. The result is often annoyed volunteers and unprepared help. Just as SMLs expect a high level of communication from their volunteers, volunteers should expect the same from their leaders.

2. Your SML Will Set Volunteers Up For Success.

Your SML will situate volunteers in such a way that they play toward their strengths. Your SML will do their best to set volunteers up for ministry "wins."

3. Your SML Will Not Assume Anything.

Often, SMLs can unintentionally project their ministry familiarity and intuition onto volunteers. Your SML will not assume that student ministry volunteers know what to do or are comfortable in this setting.

4. Your SML Will Not Force Volunteers Out Of Their Comfort Zone.

It is one thing to volunteer outside of your comfort zone, and it is an entirely different issue to be thrust outside it. Your SML will commit to respecting a volunteer's comfort zone and will not do anything to force a volunteer's hand.

5. Your SML Will Be Honest.

Honest communication is essential. If a volunteer: (1) does not seem to be present, (2) is breaking from the volunteer expectations, or (3) is over-extending themselves, then it is critical to the longevity of the relationship that your SML is honest with his concerns.

6. Your SML Will Trust His Volunteers.

No one enjoys being micro-managed. Your SML will check-in on you, but he will trust you by giving you enough space in which to work. Trust is not a lack of accountability--accountability is necessary--but rather, it is confidence in the volunteer's ability.

7. Your SML Will Always Be Appreciative.

SMLs who forget to show appreciation for their volunteers do not have volunteers for long. Your SML will make gratitude a habit.

8. Your SML Will Communicate Ministry Vision and Goals To Volunteers Clearly And Often.

It is essential to always keep the end in sight. Your SML will strive to remind both parents and volunteers of the ministry goal.

9. Your SML Will Make Mistakes.

Everyone needs grace, and SMLs are no different. Mistakes will occur. When they do, your SML will take ownership and seek forgiveness.

10. Your SML Will Pray For His Volunteers.

Successful volunteers generate successful ministries. Your SML will pray for his student ministry volunteers.

How do you use this Guide?

Every job has qualifications. Every job needs a description. I have attempted to write down the basic qualifications and job descriptions for both student ministry leaders and student ministry volunteers. Every church should have its own systems and procedures for safety and liability purposes. This guide is not all-encompassing. However, it begins to align everyone's goals and expectations. In other words: it is the foundation that must be laid for successful SML/volunteer relationships.

Student Ministry Leaders:

Use this guide as both a recruiting tool and an applicant filter.

1. As A Recruitment Tool.

Gift this to anyone that you feel would be valuable to your ministry. One of the major reasons people do not volunteer in their church is because they feel inadequate or uninformed.

2. As An Applicant Filter.

There will be people who honestly desire to help but are in a situation where they cannot fulfill the expectations. And that is perfectly fine! Sometimes, it just isn't the right season. This guide will help potential volunteers know the expectations before they commit.

Potential Volunteers

Use this guide to see where and how you can volunteer.

For some, this guide has opened your eyes to all the various ways to serve your church. You are excited and eager to plug-in. If this is you, contact your Student Ministry Leader, and begin partnering in student ministry!

For others, this has completely overwhelmed you. The expectations feel too great, and the time commitments too demanding. My advice is to speak with your Student Ministry Leader and explain your desire to help and your apprehensive feelings toward this commitment. I guarantee that you will leave the conversation encouraged.

Closing Thoughts

The expected result of a wonderful Student Ministry Leader/Student Ministry Volunteer relationship is this: An integrated, discipleship-oriented ministry that imparts a church-wide, investment-culture pattern that students will take with them as they mature and grow into adults. A healthy Student Ministry Leader/Student Ministry Volunteer strategy can greatly contribute to accomplishing this goal.

As mentioned at the beginning of the guide, there is a clear biblical precedent for surrounding yourself with other leaders who can help in the ministry's work. One place

that especially feels like youth ministry to me is when the Israelites are grumbling to Moses in the desert. This story seems so relatable to a youth director because the Israelites complained about food and water. In Moses' frustration, he appeals to the Lord for help.

In Numbers 11:16, we read, "16 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you."

God's response to Moses displayed understanding and concern. God commanded Moses to surround himself with godly men who could assist Moses in the spiritual leadership of Israel. Search for volunteers who fit this criteria. Be volunteers who fit this criteria. God bless you, and may your service in Student Ministry be fruitful for the Kingdom!

About the Author



Weston has been working in student ministry for over 15 years. He is currently the Director of Youth and Family Ministries at Lakeside Presbyterian Church, EPC. He is married to his wonderful wife, Candace, and has two children: Eva and Judah. Weston has an upcoming book (Fall/Winter 2021) in which he offers practical habits and disciplines that will lead to a long and fruitful ministry. Be sure to follow his Facebook group for student ministry leaders called "*Student Ministry Field Guide*," in which he offers advice, tips, and resources for student ministry leaders.