

Training in Youth Ministry: a duty, a commitment, a passion.

Some suggestions divided in successive issues about youth leadership. In this issue, a general introduction.

It was on a Monday six years ago. I was landing in Luanda, in Africa. For the first time I was walking on this earth that I dreamed to visit since my childhood. I was excited. The purpose of that trip was clear: I had to lead a training course for youth leaders. It was not the first time they received a training course; my presence was perceived as a part of a long term training program. Yes, a training course for youth leaders can never be accomplished in a single edition; it is part of the process of an education plan that needs constant updating.

When I arrived at the hotel, I started to revise all the material I brought with me to conduct at best this training course. It was not the first time I was called to manage such a training; since I was the youth director in the Italian Union, I always felt this task as an important mission, in order to share with my colleagues the means of an efficient youth ministry. At every level of our organization, youth leader training is a must, in order to provide means to youth leaders for fulfilling their assignment. With this in mind, I got ready to start one more leadership course.

In the church hall, that morning, more than a hundred youth leaders were waiting for me and my translator. What an emotion! But also what responsibility! Luanda is in Angola, and Angola is a country with more than 250.000 Adventists, of which more than 75% are young people. You can imagine how much the church needed a sound youth leadership! My translator told me that among these youth leaders there were regional, district, and local church youth directors. They represented almost the entire union. This was not the ideal situation. As I stated above, every church level has to provide the appropriate training. As division youth director, my reference should have been only the union youth leaders - at the most the conference youth leaders - to equip them to train the local church youth leaders. This schema allows to cover the full structure of leadership. But there I was and the time to start my speech had arrived, and I started.

More than two hundreds eyes were watching me, waiting to grasp all kind of input helpful to develop their local job. But which kind of faculties or capacities should I develop in them? It was the first time I met them, however I had to imagine that this was not their first training experience. In my mind I started to skim through my personal methods. Did they know how to apply an adequate leadership? What about their knowledge to manage the group's dynamics? And what about their skills in programming? To go more into depth: are they able to apply a leadership by age groups - adventurers, pathfinders, companions, youth seniors?

A training course has to offer a wide range of subject matters in order to provide a most complete training. A youth leader needs to deal with his youth groups trying to guide them in a pathway that should give them the tools to tackle the different issues crossing their young life: to confront issues that society stresses in today's youth life. It means to equip them to face moral and psychological development, sexual questions, family awareness, growing in faith; in other terms, how to improve a Christian lifestyle.

Wow! This seems a very big task to be easily processed! Yes, it is. But we have not to think that, as youth directors, we have to be able to “match” each kind of these concerns. As a youth leader, our best ability is to be aware of what our youth needs to know and be informed, but at the same time we can not answer every kind of question they raise. We need a support. And if it is impossible to find it within our church, we should explore other kind of resources useful to cover these needs. I remember when I attended a training course where the topic was child abuse. None of us was able to deal with such a topic. A professional was called to instruct us in this specific issue. The same strategy was adopted for a specific topic on the sexual development of young people. I repeat: as youth directors, our task is to guarantee that our youth is equipped to face their lifestyle concerns, using adequately all kind of sources.

So... back to Luanda... my African colleagues started to write. At the beginning they were disappointed. They expected to receive a list of suggestions to improve their local programs. By my experience, and by a logical approach, the good method is to teach how to improve fishing and not to give simply a “fish”. I started to speak about youth, the wonderful world of our youth and give a sense to a task that they were supposed to perform. Day by day, for a long week, we tried to satisfy some of the most important aspects of youth ministry. I tried to subdivide the main training course in four chapters: youth and group dynamics, leadership, programming, and organisation. Naturally I tried to avoid an excess of resources, and I applied a four year strategy, one edition for every main topic. I avoided also to overfeed them with a flow of “theoretical instructions”. I divided each day in periods, alternating theory and group dynamics. Sport activities, social meetings and church programs were also part of the training course; a very dynamic and more participative method.

Since Angola belonged to the Euro-Africa Division, I was able to implement the whole training program. Each year that I visited the country (four years), my satisfaction grew in the measure the youth leaders gave their reports. Not only did they apply what they learnt in the last session, but new groups were born, new members joined the youth group. Finally the mission aims were attained.

I’m aware that the African context is different than ours. But, even if in our European context it is not really so easy to point out this equation “training course = church growth”, this schema still is an important and indispensable instrument of development.

In our division, on each level, our youth leaders are fulfilling a tremendous work as trainers. I know that in each country local youth leaders receive every year an updated instruction. Society is growing in every direction; technology is imposing its trend; the expectations of youth become more exigent; and so on. For these reasons, the José Figols Center tried to give an answer, organizing a special training course, a Master of Arts in Youth Ministry for postgraduate students. It would take another page to explain in details how this Master is being implemented (take a look at the “Masters Series”). It is enough to point out the agreement of the participants, mainly youth directors at all levels, which are aware that an improvement of our approach is indispensable. Our youth deserves this.

Youth ministry is fulfilling an important mission, but a good intention alone is not enough. Each youth leader who is not only aware of his or her duty, but has also a passion for youth, knows and reacts, and lets him or herself be led by the master of all trainers: Jesus. With Him nobody fails.