

Leading a Praying Youth Ministry

Phil Miglioratti of The Re-Imagine Network interviews author Mike Higgs about his new book *The Praying Youth Ministry*.

PHIL>>> Mike, you have written *The Praying Youth Ministry* as a youth leader, for youth leaders, but the principles you share, the lessons you have learned, the scriptural and spiritual insights you have experienced, jump out as relevant and applicable to all church ministry leaders. Is this a fair perspective on your book?

MIKE>>> It sure is. My wife keeps reminding me of that. While my primary audience is youth workers—that has been my primary “tribe” for 45 years (I started doing youth work when I was five)—a lot applies to any follower of Jesus. Especially Part One.

“Ministry re-formation is essential if we’re to fulfill our mission.”

PHIL>>> How does a leader begin to think about re-formation? What is the path, the questions, of rethinking how to think about ministry?

MIKE>>> Most of us are familiar with the passage about new wine needing new wineskins, but Luke’s account makes it clear: “And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better’” (5:39). We all get comfortable with our ministry methodology, and often it’s hard to abandon what has seemed to work (for years, or even decades). Beginning to think about youth ministry re-formation begins with prayer. It’s not all about prayer—it’s important to understand the rapidly changing youth culture, the challenges young people face today (which are daunting) and so on. Youth ministry has always been pretty good at the Issachar anointing of

“understanding the times” (1 Chron. 12:32). But perhaps not as good as following the lead of Jehoshaphat, who clearly understood his times when opposing armies were too big and too close in 2 Chron. 20, and responded by calling for prayer and fasting. I don’t spell this out in much detail in my book, but the origins of modern youth ministry—Youth For Christ, Young Life, FCA—were birthed out of prayer. I have the biographies on my shelves that say as much. So we need to get back to that: prayer. Followed by obedience to what God has to say.

“We need more than a subtle shift to get back on God’s tracks.”

PHIL>>> It is easy to make a change based on a new program or someone’s “successful” ministry. But you seem to be challenging us to begin with thoughtful repentance? [“A biblical definition of repentance is to make a change of mind, heart, and action, by turning away from sin and self and returning to God.” Ministry site]

MIKE>>> I am not going to throw my tribe under the bus. Modern youth ministry has done some amazing things, and changed the lives of literally millions of teenagers. I am a product of modern youth ministry! But like I say in the book, there are some things that I have seen, experienced, and (unfortunately) been a part of in my youth ministry career that call for repentance. I am not the Holy Spirit; I will not call people out. But I have done, and continue to do, my fair share of repenting. I think a lifestyle of prayerful repentance is a spiritually healthy one.

I do not believe God is done with youth ministry. All one has to do is survey the contemporary youth culture and discern that young people today are as “helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd” as they have ever been. So as your definition suggests, we need a repentance that is “a change of mind, heart, and action” regarding our methodology of discipling the “unreached people group” of American

adolescents. The guts of youth ministry will stay the same—loving kids into the Kingdom—but the particulars regarding how to do that will change. And God is more than happy to show us what to change, and how to do it. If we will ask Him.

Almost 20 years after authoring *Youth Ministry On Our Knees*, I realize that my answers, while helpful, were somewhat insufficient. They did not make room for the mysteries of prayer.

PHIL>>> Mike, I am also discovering this in my ministry. Prayer strategies. Prayer resources. Prayer guides. All these have potential benefits but if they swap the mystery of God for human methodologies or gifted teachers' messages, we are depriving prayer of its power.

MIKE>>> One of the reasons I included a chapter called Quantum Jesus: Paradoxology Prayer is precisely that. The chapter has very little to do with youth ministry but a whole lot to do with the mystery of God. I plan on spending eternity plumbing the mystery of God.

“The morning I began writing this book, God spoke to me about three different kinds of Upper Rooms.”

PHIL>>> Explain to us how “Upper Rooms” in Scripture (Daniel, Last Supper, Acts) can be a template for our leading and ministering practices?

MIKE>>>I highlight three “Upper Rooms” in Scripture. The first is the Upper Room where Jesus spent his final hours with His apostles before the Cross. John 13-17 is often referred to as the Upper Room Discourse. And while Jesus covers a lot of territory in those chapters, one can sum it up nicely in John 15:5: “apart from Me you can do nothing.” Abiding in Christ means walking in love, which is a by-product of a lifestyle of purity and holiness.

The second Upper Room is found in Daniel 6, and has to do with his personal prayer life. He ended up napping in a den with a lion as a pillow because he would not compromise his Hebrew pattern of praying three times a day. The point is not that we need to pray three times a day (actually, we are supposed to pray without ceasing) but that we establish at the leading of the Holy Spirit a rule of life, so to speak, and stick to it—not out of religious obligation, but in order to cultivate intimacy with Jesus.

The third Upper Room is in Acts 1 and 2, and, has to do with corporate prayer. Lots to say about that in the first several chapters of Acts. Remember when Jesus was asked by His followers to teach them to pray? His model with one of corporate prayer: “Our Father . . .” So, three Upper Rooms highlighting three aspects of prayer: prayer prerequisites, personal prayer, and corporate prayer.

“Jesus is what God sounds like.”

PHIL>>> This perceptive insight appears to connect prayer maturity with discipleship, a life-long connection to the mind of Christ in the Scriptures.

MIKE>>> We are all supposed to hear God. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice.” But we do so in very different ways. My wife hears God almost audibly, almost daily. Not so with me. But . . . we can ALL hear God through His Word. And Jesus is His Incarnate Word.

“Prayer Spaces in Schools” Turning classrooms [or Sunday School rooms] into simple, hospitable prayer spaces.

PHIL>>> Your book is filled with creative strategies and ideas for people to experiment and experience the mysterious prayer you teach about. Please unpack how leaders can shift from directing prayer (like an orchestra leader with a script) to facilitating prayer (like a group jam session).

MIKE>>> A good youth worker probably does both—some orchestra, some jam session. Modeling prayer as a lifestyle will shift that balance in the favor of jam session. Prayer is more caught than taught; while I have read most of the best books on prayer, I was mentored and disciplined by men and women who were mighty in prayer. And, I married an intercessor who has taught me much as well.

“Loving is the syntax of prayer. To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers.” Richard Foster

PHIL>>> How is love the syntax of prayer?

MIKE>>> I’m sure Richard Foster unpacks that phrase much better than I can! But to be succinct, and to paraphrase/mutilate 1 Cor. 12: “If I pray with eloquence and passion and endurance but have not love, I am wasting my breath.” The best praying is motivated by love: an all-consuming love for Jesus, and an enduring love for all who are created Imago Dei—in His image.

“My life soundtrack (starts with) The Beach Boys.”

PHIL>>> You know I am a Beach Boys fanaddict, especially because their music (especially their harmonics) evokes a spiritual focus when I listen. I often connect with God’s Spirit when I listen. How does music impact you? How should we employ music in our ministry?

MIKE>>> My first record—a 45—was the Beach Boys’ “I Get Around.” The point I made in the book was that most everybody has a life soundtrack. What that soundtrack was in our past is out of our control. I grew up in the 60’s, with no faith in Jesus, so was significantly influenced by the popular music of the era (Beach Boys, Beatles, Crosby, Stills and Nash, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carole King, etc.), but we can curate what our life soundtrack is in the future. Somebody smart said that music is one of the languages of heaven. Without getting into a theology of music (perhaps my next book? Nah) music is

a very big deal to God. But I don't think we should reduce our diets to "contemporary worship" music only. Romans 12:1-2 tells me that offering my body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, is my spiritual act of worship, not playing worship music in the background all day. That does not mean the latter is a bad thing, and I sometimes do that in my office or on a long drive. But I also play music on stringed instruments, and listen to music that stirs me spiritually. Sometimes that is what we call "worship" music today, sometimes not so much.

New wine must be poured into new wineskins." -Luke 5:37

PHIL>>> Mike, please write a prayer we can pray seeking to become leaders who minister from Upper Rooms.

MIKE>>> *Father, may Your Kingdom come and Your will be done first and foremost in our own lives. May we become men and women of prayer as a supernatural byproduct of our purity and our intimacy with Jesus. May we never forget that apart from Jesus we can do nothing, yet we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And may our prayers, combined with our obedience, bring heaven to earth, bring a growing number of those on the earth into heaven, and hasten Christ's return. We ask this in the name of our intercessor, Jesus, amen.*

Order your copy of *The Praying Youth Ministry*, either at prayershop.org/the-praying-youth-ministry (quicker and cheaper), Amazon, or wherever you purchase your Christian books. Order it for all your church's youth workers.