

E-QUALITY



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A JUNIOR HIGH SURVIVOR'S VISION FOR YOUTH GROUPS PASSIONATE ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY

By Sara Lynn Wilhelm

When I was asked to write an article on the importance of teaching students about gender equality, I scarcely paused before replying, "Yes, of course!" As you might guess, I am a survivor of the "junior high experience."

You may remember this time with fondness, but more than likely you will recall moments of pain, as self-discovery resulted in isolation and insecurity. Junior high was this way for me in many respects. I changed, but my baby face couldn't quite catch up to me. I wanted to be an adult, but also still wanted to remain a kid. And then there was high school—more time of exploration and discovery as I tried to find my voice and figure out what my life meant in the midst of a large world. From junior high all the way through college, I heard voices telling me who I should be.

Not only have I spent the majority of my life as a student (I tell student groups that I'm in the 20th grade), but youth ministry has been a continual part of my life. I have been involved in the lives of students since 1999 as a youth group leader, teacher and preacher, and school administrator. During college I began working with a youth group and fell in love with junior high students. They are at that amazing age where they are trying to be cool and fit in, but are ready for real life transformation and authenticity.

It is from both my experience as a student and from my work with other students that my passion for gender equality and my pursuit of gender justice has been formed.

Why Gender Equality and Justice are Important

The messages young men and women hear in churches from their elders and peers matter tremendously, because these words and actions help students form their core values. My time in youth group has had the most lasting and profound impact on the person I am today. Through these experiences, I came to believe my faith with a sort of ownership I had never known before. I was encouraged to be exactly as God made me, challenged to follow Christ, and affirmed as a leader.

However, my youth group experience was not perfect. There were moments when I heard the girls around me so consumed by outward things that they paid no attention to their own worth. There were young men who didn't respect me and made fun of my passion for Christ.

When I was in junior high, I remember going on a youth group's fall retreat. All of the girls drank skim milk and barely touched their food. I went to the opposite extreme and had food eating contests with senior



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high guys who were twice my size. I felt instinctively that there was something wrong with a retreat when we all learned about God's love but half of us didn't eat.

Certain things never made sense to me...like why the guys were the only ones expected to carry things on the mission trips (so I muscled 50 pound water jugs on a mission trip to Mexico to prove that women could do it, too). And I will never

forget challenging guys when they would say that their wives were going to stay home and cook for them. My 14-year-old self proudly proclaimed, "Well, when I marry, my husband will cook for me!"

Jokes that guys told like, "What do you do when the dishwasher breaks? You beat her," broke my heart. I would tell guys who cracked those jokes in youth group that they were not being funny, and that Christ would never support the abuse of anyone.

Some people might think that these "small" things don't matter, but they do. When I was in junior high, I went to conferences where they told me that I could change the world for Christ...and I believed them. I believed them with my heart and soul and mind...with everything my young self possessed. As a 7th grader I *knew* I had a calling to *live my life for Jesus Christ*. Above and beyond anything, *this* was what really mattered. Yet, many of the girls my age were far more concerned with the guy they were dating than with God's call.

If a young woman never sees women leaders of significance, and if young men are not taught to respect women leaders, then our window of opportunity for creating communities that are about biblical equality and justice is severely diminished. Gender and justice in youth groups matter because church should never be the place where young men learn that their value lies in having power over women and where they are not expected to respect women as their equals in the kingdom of God. Nor should church be the place where young women come to believe that their identity lies in relation to a man.

We should not be the communities that create new forms of idolatry or support old ones long held dear. We should be the communities where all are set free to love and serve, where students receive a vision for biblical equality and justice that lays the ground work for the rest of their lives.

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How to Convey Gender Equality to Students

As culture continues to shift, young people face new challenges, including the sexualization of increasingly younger women. This trend puts enormous pressure on young women and girls to emphasize their physical attractiveness. I can hardly believe how many of the girls I have met and served struggle with eating disorders and have overwhelming self-image issues.

That's why it's so important to me to become the type of woman that I want them to be: a woman who, in the midst of imperfections and my own insecurities, believes that God has called me and that I am free to be myself and to love God and others because of the way I know that God loves me. That's why I find my voice and challenge young men to respect their sisters and to love one another as we have been loved. That's why, as a leader, I stand in the gap and let guys know that they will respect the women around them. I do this lovingly, but I do it intentionally.

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As we think about how to convey the message of biblical equality and justice to students, intentionality plays an important role in the equation. We must be intentional about discussing the importance Scripture places on justice and equality. This means we must deal with injustice in our students' actions and lovingly correct them. It means we share the stories of women of faith as well as men, that we highlight the feminine and masculine aspects of God, that we seek to eliminate gender stereotypes and pigeon-holes. It means creating a space where all are challenged to love Christ and each other more fully.

We must also be intentional about the kind of leaders we are and about the kind of communities that we foster for our students. Over the past few years I have had the privilege of leading alongside my good friend Ben Lindwall who is on staff with a church in the city where I live. He has intentionally invited me in to speak at his youth group over the past few years, because of his concern that his students were only hearing the voices of men teaching them the things of God. Together in leadership we have been able to witness amazing transformation in the lives of students.

Ben shared with me an experience he and his wife, Jen, shared when they co-led a trip to Belize this summer. As Jen led worship for the group, they noticed that some of the guys were rather aloof. When approached, these guys said that they just could not get into worship when it was sung with a woman's voice.

There were also times when Jen would give directions (she is an amazing leader!) and some of the guys would look to Ben as if to make sure it really was what they needed to do. When they became aware of this, both Jen and Ben confronted unacceptable ways of treating a woman leader. By leading together and advocating for one another as equals, they were intentional about the community they created for their students.

As I discussed this article with Ben, we spoke together about how youth ministry is an opportunity for us to model principles of the kingdom of heaven. Part of that model is encouraging young men to come under the leadership of women and having adult men come under the pastoral leadership of women. It is important that we not just *talk* about us being equal, but that we actually create space for women to lead along with and in authority over men. I love how Ben said it, "Deconstruction has to take place of the system, and a new system has to be created." This is why Ben's church has decided to align their youth group structure with this belief in gender equality.

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In a recent move to re-hire, they decided that all student ministry from grade 5-12 will be led by two co-pastors: a man and a woman. They will each share the teaching load, the administration and decision making, and they will alternate the context in which they speak. The goal is that true co-pastors will give both the young men and the young women a vision for a community where justice and equality is a reality, a community where life and ministry are done together.

An Opportunity like No Other

Youth group and the student experience is a time full of opportunity. It is our calling and responsibility as leaders to create communities of faith in which our students are challenged to transformation. They are a part of our community today and they will be the leaders of the future. It is never too soon to help develop a passion for equality and justice between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, of all races. And it is never too soon to invite them to participate in a community like the community Paul desired for the Galatians, a community where we are all one in Christ.

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